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Flying Doctors lend a hand

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Medical volunteers saw nearly 800 patients without health insurance at a Coachella health fair during the weekend, and organizers said they would have seen hundreds more if they had the resources to help them.

"There's no end to the need, that's for sure," said Dr. David Morgan. He's a member of The Flying Doctors, a Northern California-based nonprofit group that visits patients in Mexico and Central America too poor to afford health care.

The Coachella Valley is the group's only U.S. destination, which the volunteers visit twice a year.

Morgan said valley patients usually hail from the same Latin American villages that The Flying Doctors visit, or nearby areas. "They just happen to be on our side of the border," he said.

He was among 38 volunteers who provided pro bono medical, dental, vision and chiropractic care to patients Saturday at Coachella Valley High School.

The group has visited the valley the past 12 years. Funding and help with coordinating the event are provided by the Coachella Valley Unified School District.

Many patients at the fair were undocumented migrant workers ineligible for government health programs such as Medi-Cal.

Still, The Flying Doctors stays out of the national debate on immigration. It keeps its goal simple: "We go down and help people that don't have adequate care. We aren't helping certain types or kinds," Morgan said.

About 200 people were in line at 6 a.m. for the fair, which started at 8 a.m., said Sandra Sanchez, the school district's grants manager.

"They're the working poor - they barely have enough money to pay the rent and feed their families," Sanchez said. "They're very grateful. They're already asking when the next one is going to be."

However, Morgan said, The Flying Doctors' check-ups are only a "drop in the bucket" of the care their patients should receive.

"It's not adequate care by any means, what these people are getting," he said. "It's better than nothing. We do what we can."

Sanchez said local hubs John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital, Eisenhower Medical Center and Desert Regional Medical Center don't participate in the fair, but she would love to see them help.

"We could always use more," Sanchez said.

Royal Plaza Inn provides discounted rooms for the medical staff. Ciro's and La Casita restaurants offer free or discounted meals.

The next Flying Doctors event is planned for the spring, Sanchez said.
