

The Status of Primary Care Access for People Experiencing Homelessness in Alameda County

Background

In 2023, Alameda County Health, Health Care for the Homeless (ACHCH) and Public Health Community Assessment, Planning, and Evaluation (CAPE) collaborated on a project to gain insight into the experiences of People Experiencing Homeless in accessing and receiving health care services in Alameda County. The findings, obtained through a series of focus group, conducted at homeless shelters, encampments and drop-in centers across the county, demonstrate the complex needs of an underserved population, who face multiple barriers accessing care, and often distrust a medical system that has caused and compounded traumatic harm.

Purpose

As a follow-up to the focus group findings, in mid-2024, ACHCH followed up with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and Community Health Centers (see appendix A) to assess the current state of access to primary care across the community clinic network in Alameda County.

This work happened through calls to clinic appointment lines, with ACHCH staff posing as a prospective patient. Staff called 13 FQHC's/Community Health Clinic organizations that provide care at 36 locations in Alameda County. Each organization was asked the following questions, and provided response across all their clinic sites:

- 1) Are they accepting new patients for primary care?
- 2) What is the wait-time for new patients?
- 3) For existing patients, how long does it take to get an appointment with their PCP?

Findings

While the significant expansion of Medi-Cal over the last several years has resulted in coverage for nearly all PEH, system barriers continue to make access to primary care challenging. **LifeLong (with the exception of Trust) and Tiburcio Vasquez reported to ACHCH that they are not accepting new patients at any of their clinic sites, and AHS Highland Wellness (the largest AHS ambulatory care site) is also closed to new patients.**

The exceptions are Bay Area Community Health (Fremont), Davis Street Primary Care Clinic (San Leandro) and AXIS Community Health (Livermore and Pleasanton), and LifeLong Trust Clinic (Oakland) - all who are currently accepting new patients. **The average wait-time for new patients to get an appointment with a primary care provider is three months.** For existing patients, the wait-time to get an appointment with their primary care provider can range from one and a half weeks to one month.

The current lack of primary care access exacerbates the profound health outcomes demonstrated in the Alameda County Homeless Mortality Report findings that the **age-adjusted mortality rate for people experiencing homelessness in Alameda County in 2022 was 5.4 times that of the general population.**

[\(Alameda County Homeless Mortality - ALAMEDA COUNTY HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS \(achch.org\)\)](#). Without access, people delay care and/or inappropriately use expensive emergency services.

This further compounds the challenges PEH face of system navigation, consistency of care, bias and discrimination, lack of trust in service providers and quality issues/inferior services as reflected in the Focus Group Study findings.

Best Practices and Opportunity

Drop-in has been used as a method of intervention to address the issue of health care access. Patients are able to show up at a clinic location and receive care without scheduling an appointment. **This approach enables health clinics to reduce or eliminate delays in patient care and enhances continuity of care.**

This model has only been successfully implemented at several clinic locations; however, they **only exist in Oakland currently**. LifeLong is scheduled to open a TRUST clinic in Berkeley in 2025.

-Roots Community Health Clinic has adopted the Open Access model with their “Welcome Wednesdays”, an open campus for the unhoused members of their community. Every Wednesday from 1pm-3pm, unhoused people can receive medical services including blood pressure checks and glucose checks as well as wrap-around services such as health education, navigation & care management, referrals, vaccinations, hygiene kits, benefits enrollment, employment services, food pantries, showers and linkages to other resources.

-LifeLong TRUST Clinic is a primary care clinic in Downtown Oakland with robust integrated behavioral health, substance use, gender affirming care and HIV care for homeless patients, as well as health education and housing support services. The clinic has drop-in hours for new and existing patients Monday-Friday at 8:30 am or 1pm.

-LifeLong Howard Daniel Clinic is a primary clinic in Oakland that has drop-in hours for existing patients Monday and Wednesday 1-2pm.

Appendix A: List of FQHCs and Community Clinics Contacted

- Alameda Health System (2)
- Asian Health Services (1)
- AXIS Community Health (3 locations)
- Bay Area Community Health (6 locations)
- Baywell Health (Formerly West Oakland Health Center) (2)
- Davis Street Primary Care Clinic (1 Location)
- James A. Watson Wellness Center (no response)
- La Clinica: (3 locations)
- LifeLong Medical Health Center (4)
- Native American Health Center (1)
- Order of Malta Clinic of Northern California
- Roots Community Health Clinic (2 Locations)
- Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center (10 Location)

Appendix B: Q&A Details by FQHCs and Community Clinics Contacted

- 1) Are they accepting new patients for primary care?
- 2) What is the wait-time for new patients?
- 3) For existing patients, how long does it take to get an appointment with their PCP?

Alameda Health System:

Q1	All sites accepting new patients but Highland and Eastmont, they are not accepting new patients until January 2025
Q2	Eastmont: Waitlist -but unclear on wait time
Q3	Eastmont: Depends on providers and their individual schedules

Asian Health Services:

Q1	Yes, regardless of the patient's insurance coverage.
Q2	If it's not urgent, it can take three months. If it's urgent, make an effort to gather people together with you in the next two weeks. There are a few limited same-day appointments that are reserved for patients with the most urgent needs.
Q3	It depends on the provider's schedule and the severity of the patient's needs. It maybe one month, two months, or three months. The schedule is determined by the PCP's assessment of patient needs. Telehealth appointments are available for existing patients, but they are usually one to two weeks out.

AXIS Community Health:

Q1	Yes
Q2	3 months
Q3	2-3 weeks

Bay Area Community Health:

Q1	Yes
Q2	No wait time
Q3	5-7 days

Baywell Health (Formerly West Oakland Health Center)

Q1	Yes
Q2	New patient appointments are not available until mid-Jan
Q3	On average, it takes six to eight weeks.

Davis Street Primary Care Clinic:

Q1	Yes: All new patients are screened by eligibility worker
Q2	No response

Q3	No response
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James A. Watson Health Center:

Q1	No response
Q2	No response
Q3	No response

La Clinica:

Q1	Fuente Wellness Center (San Leandro youth & young adults ages 11-24): Yes Fruitvale: No response San Antonio: Yes
Q2	Fuente Wellness Center: Dependent on social work assessment Fruitvale: No response San Antonio: 6- 8 weeks
Q3	Fuente Wellness Center: No response Fruitvale: No response San Antonio: It depends on the patient's needs. The provider will assess the need.

LifeLong Medical Health Centers:

Q1	Clinics in Berkeley and Oakland are only accepting Alameda Alliance members assigned to them prior to 1/1/24. They do not have capacity to take new patients, and there is no waitlist at this time. The exception to this is the Trust Health Center, which has capacity to take new patients. All clinics do have capacity to enroll Medicare patients enrolled in the following plans: Brown & Toland, Alta Bates, Aetna, Scan Health Care, AARP Medicare Complete, Alignment Health Plan, and Humana.
Q2	For new patients, the wait times are approximately 2 weeks for a new appointment.
Q3	For established patients, wait times are approximately 1-½ weeks for an appointment.

Native American Health Center:

Q1	They are accepting new patients. Appointments, a month out.
Q2	No Wait list
Q3	A in person appointment is a month out. Telecare appointment is one week out.

Order of Malta Clinic of Northern California

Q1	Accepting new patients who are not covered by health insurance
Q2	The first appointment is scheduled for two to three weeks out.
Q3	About two weeks

Roots Community Health Clinic:

Q1	Yes
Q2	Two -three weeks
Q3	It takes two to four weeks. The average is approximately three weeks.

Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center:

Q1	Not Accepting new patients
Q2	NA
Q3	NA