

Bridge to Obamacare opens in county

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Provided photo

Locations of clinics

Applicants for ViaCare must provide photo identification, proof of county residency, proof of legal permanent residency or U.S. citizenship, proof of income and a Social Security number.

[Application](#)

packets are available at:

- Natividad Medical Center, 1441 Constitution Blvd., Salinas
- Alisal Health Center, 559 E. Alisal St., Salinas
- Seaside Family Health Center, 1150 Fremont Blvd., Seaside
- One Stop Office, 1760 D2 Fremont Blvd., Seaside
- Monterey County Health Clinic, 3155 De Forest Road, Marina
- Monterey County Department of Social Services, 116 Broadway St., King City
- Castro Plaza Resource Center, 10601 McDougall St., Castroville

Hundreds of local residents gained health insurance Monday with the rollout of a new program targeting the estimated 60,000 uninsured and under-insured residents in Monterey County.

Launched during a noon press conference at Natividad Medical Center in Salinas, ViaCare Monterey County is designed as a short-term safety net for county residents who suddenly find themselves unable to afford regular health insurance but do not qualify for Medi-Cal, officials explained during a news conference at the Salinas hospital.

It is a [collaboration](#)

among the hospital, the county Health Department, several churches, labor organizations and nonprofit groups, [including](#) Communities Organized for relational Power in Action (COPA), the key organizer of the effort.

COPA's mission is to teach people to engage in public life to change the economic, social, political and cultural pressures on their [families](#)

— such as health care. It comprises 24 member institutions across Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, including [congregations](#), synagogues, schools and nonprofit organizations.

One component of President Obama's Affordable Care Act expands Medi-Cal so that more residents are covered. Until the ACA kicks in on Jan. 1, 2014, ViaCare will serve as a bridge health care system. It will be administered by the Central Coast Alliance for Health, a locally governed nonprofit health plan that serves more than 210,000 members in Santa Cruz, Monterey and Merced counties — members like Mario Torres.

Torres, employed as a home-care provider, was caring for his ill mother in 2010. He suddenly found himself also taking care of his father, who required even more intense home care. Torres was forced to cut back his work to less than 80 hours per month, which prompted his expulsion from his medical insurance plan.

“In 2010, I lost my insurance and 75 percent of my income,” Torres said. “It was hard; it was scary.”

Having been diagnosed with Type II diabetes a few years earlier, Torres needs daily medication, frequent blood-sugar testing, regular lab work and other services that he could no longer afford. By providing health

insurance through ViaCare, his physician will be able to monitor any change and alter his course of treatment before more devastating diabetes-related illnesses take hold, such as heart or kidney failure, or limb amputation. Monitoring and adjusting care is far less expensive than surgery or kidney dialysis.

“Preventative care is cheaper,” said Monterey County Supervisor Jane Parker, who along with Supervisor Simon Salinas spearheaded the effort to get ViaCare approved by the Board of Supervisors. “When you invest early in key things that breed success, a lot of things will take care of themselves.”

Nancy Majewski, operations manager at Natividad and the hospital’s point person for the ViaCare rollout, said residents fill out [applications](#)

and drop them off at one of three locations. The applications are forwarded to the Monterey County Department [☞](#) of Social Services, where they are evaluated for eligibility.

That process can take up to 50 days. When approved, the resident will receive a ViaCare card that is good for a chosen or assigned clinic. Natividad will provide in-patient care and diagnostics not available at clinics. ViaCare can accommodate an initial 500 residents, but as more residents move into expanded Medi-Cal after Jan. 1, 2014, more will move into ViaCare through a waiting list.

Many of the officials present Monday at Natividad commented that ViaCare will provide the entire local health care system and governing bodies with the experience needed to roll out the Affordable Healthcare Act at the first of the year.

“We are insuring hundreds today so we will be ready to insure thousands tomorrow,” said Alicia Hernandez Sanchez, associate director for Salinas-based Central Coast Center for Independent Living.

Residents lined up at Natividad at 6:30 a.m. Monday to receive application packets. By day’s end, 60 packages were handed out.

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