

Roberto S. Juarez

Champion in Underserved Medical Care

Ventura County's health-care-for-all CEO

By Tom Bronzini

Special to the Business Times

Roberto S. Juarez speaks from experience when he sends members of his outreach department to Ventura County's fields, packing houses, laundromats and bars to tell workers how they can get health care.

The CEO of the nonprofit Clinicas del Camino Real did that himself in the early 1970s as a volunteer for five fledgling free health clinics he helped establish while working as a public health administrator for the county. In 1978, he was approached to leave his job as an administrator at Ventura County Hospital with a staff of 300 to lead the Santa Paula clinic, which had become a community health center with a paid staff of five.

At the time it seemed like a crazy proposition, he said, but he was feeling burned out from years of taking political heat over his advocacy of affirmative action. He had helped develop a plan that became a model for Ventura County and the state of California.

He made the unlikely career move and, over his 37-plus years leading the organization that grew into Clinicas del Camino Real, he has been a dynamic and steadfast champion of health care for those least able to afford it.

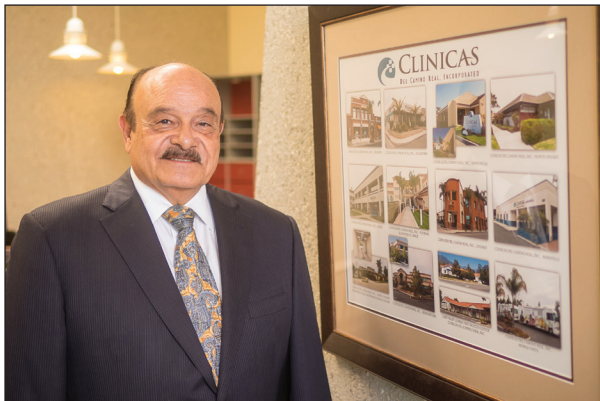
Clinicas now has 13 health centers and two mobile units in Ventura County serving many who faced language and cultural barriers as well as financial ones. It has grown from five employees to more than 700. Patient visits have risen from 1,300 a year to 370,000. Juarez started with a \$60,000 annual budget, and in the next fiscal year it will reach \$90 million.

No one is turned away because they can't pay for health care. Clinicas is unusual in offering an all-encompassing menu of services under one roof: medical, dental, vision, psychology and psychiatry. Three well-equipped mobile units carry medical and dental care and health education throughout the county. The nonprofit has been a steady resource that people can count on.

"I know that we have people that we have delivered their babies, and those babies grew up and we've delivered their babies, and that baby grew up and we delivered their baby. So we have good staying power with our patients," Juarez said. "We advocate for them on a national and state level. We're out in the fields with them where they work."

Clinicas is able to help those with limited resources through a grant as a federally qualified health center, part of a national safety net. Patients who can't pay receive a discount based on the size of their family and their income. The nonprofit is reimbursed by Medi-Cal and Medicaid on a cost basis, and that resource helps fund coverage for uninsured.

"There's a tremendous need in this county, and it's not just the farm workers and their families," Juarez said. "We concentrate on them because that's the greatest population with the greatest need, but we're here for everybody."



Roberto S. Juarez, a Vietnam veteran, is CEO of the nonprofit Clinicas del Camino Real, which has 13 health centers and two mobile units in Ventura County. As early as next fiscal year, Roberto S. Juarez and Clinicas Del Camino Real will have an expected budget of \$90 million.

He said that, with the Affordable Care Act, more patients are insured, but Clinicas still sees "probably more than our share of uninsured." Now that more people have insurance, providers that didn't want them are now taking them, and Juarez said there aren't enough doctors. "So they're recruiting our doctors and paying salaries that we just can't match," he said. "And if we match them, they'll go up some more, so we're having our medical staff raided."

Clinicas' growth has been so robust that this month, the nonprofit moved its administrative headquarters from its longtime home in Ventura, where part of the facility is a clinic, to a much larger space in Camarillo. Both buildings are fully in use by various departments.

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Clinicas del Camino Real

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college and rise to high-skill positions.

"We've had people who started with us as clerks that have come back 10 years later as doctors," Juarez said. "We have clinical social workers, nurses that we've graduated, and administrators."

Juarez has been a health care champion at the state and national level as well. He chaired committees for four governors, working on funding for farm worker programs and helping to establish more than 200 farm worker clinics. During Bill Clinton's administration, he chaired a national committee on health care.

Juarez studied business administration at UCLA and California Lutheran University. He is the first in his family to attend college. His grandparents migrated from Mexico during the Mexican Civil War and settled in Colorado, where his father was born. During the Great Depression, his father's family and his grandparents were sent to Mexico on cattle cars under a federal repatriation program.

They lost their homes and property. His father later returned to the U.S. Juarez said he feels blessed to do work that has helped so many immigrants.

"But, if that population were any other population, I would still be that dedicated to it," he said.

He has a sense of purpose from his military experiences in Vietnam, where he earned a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. "I was left for dead on the battlefield and you do see things there," he said. "So this is part of my payback."