



Health care sees gains countywide

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Latest in a series on top local stories of 2008. Today: Health care in Solano County.

From the launch of a new prescription drug discount card program to the opening of a new health clinic in north Vallejo, Solano County this year was home to many strides toward enabling residents to lead healthier lives.

The moves came just in time, as 2008 was a year filled with several challenges that threatened residents' health.

With many workers losing their jobs -- and employer-sponsored medical benefits -- the prospect of an increasing number of residents going without needed medical care became more real.

In September, the county started a prescription drug discount card program with CVS Caremark and the National Association of Counties. The card, provided free at county offices and libraries, saves residents -- with or without insurance -- an average of 20 percent on prescription medications.

Within a month of the program's launch, more than 51,000 residents had picked up cards.

In that same period, two tragedies grabbed the county's attention and highlighted the need for awareness of mental health problems.

In September, 19-year-old Jason Louis Van Brunt committed suicide by leaping from the Benicia-Martinez Bridge amid a cloud of personal stresses. Shortly after, Fairfield City Councilman Frank Kardos hanged himself less than a day after being convicted of felony assault and misdemeanor domestic battery.

Mental health struggles also were brought into focus by a fall study revealing that 80 percent of Americans were stressed by the economic crisis.

Local residents said the city's bankruptcy and the economic slowdown was stressful because it has hindered loved ones from being able to find work.

Local residents also struggled to abide by a new law prohibiting the disposal of needles, syringes and lancets, such as those used by diabetics, in regular trash.

Along with new laws, 2008 saw new revelations.

In August, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that new HIV infections had been underreported for several years. An estimated 56,000 new infections occurred in 2006, more than the 40,000 previously reported. Local groups, like the Solano AIDS Coalition, say they are struggling to help county sufferers because funding is hard to come by in this economy.

Many county residents have taken health care into their own hands by turning to dance classes to work up a sweat. A Polynesian dance class run by the Greater Vallejo Recreation District has become a popular attraction for all ages.

Dancing is a good way to get needed exercise, says the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which this year released new guidelines for how much weekly exercise adults and children need.

The previous standard of 30 minutes of moderate exercise each day for adults was replaced with a general recommendation of 2.5 hours each week, spread out at the exerciser's discretion.

And as county officials and residents look to the future with hope for a solution to rising health care costs and numbers of uninsured people, the recently opened La Clinica de la Raza in north Vallejo offers a small glimpse of what could be. The facility, which opened Nov. 3, is helping Sutter Solano Medical Center cut its emergency department load. It is also helping low-income, uninsured and underinsured residents with urgent and primary care needs.