

Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center named one of top 15 Portland-area nonprofits

By Ellen Gilmer, The Oregonian

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HILLSBORO -- When the **Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center** cracked the top 15 on a recent list of Portland-area nonprofits, it was a sign of just how far the health-care provider has come from the Cornelius garage where it started 34 years ago.

The **Portland Business Journal** ranked the agency, with a \$23 million budget and 300 employees, between the **YMCA of Columbia-Willamette** and **Shriners Hospital for Children**. Although the Virginia Garcia has been successful in meeting the health needs of its largely Latino clientele, the need continues to outstrip the agency's growth.

Virginia Garcia's success stems from its focus on primary care, says Jeff Anderson of the **Oregon Community Foundation**, which promotes philanthropy and has arranged \$300,000 in funding for Virginia Garcia over the past decade.

"They are completely unique in the degree to which they are culturally sensitive and able to inspire trust," he says. "It's hard to imagine Washington County without them."

The center didn't set out to become such a far-reaching institution, says CEO Gil Muñoz; it has simply responded to leaps in population.

"There is a driving force in the community to have Virginia Garcia expand," Muñoz said. "We have responded to that call."



BRENT WOJAHN/The Oregonian

Dr. Tanya Kapka checks Edith Valadez of Forest Grove, who is about 3 months pregnant with her second child, at the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center in Hillsboro. This nonprofit health agency serves 30,000 patients in Washington and Yamhill counties.

Modest beginnings

The clinic is named after a 6-year-old girl who came with her farmworker family to Oregon in 1975. When a cut on her foot became infected, her family, who had little money and spoke no English, did not immediately seek medical help.

Virginia Garcia died on Father's Day in 1975. The community came together to form the nonprofit in her memory and prevent similar tragedies by providing services to those with cultural barriers to health care, especially Spanish speakers.

From its initial clinic in Cornelius, the agency has expanded to add clinics in McMinnville, Hillsboro and Beaverton, pharmacy and dental services and health centers at **Tigard** and **Forest Grove** high schools.

It serves about 30,000 people, four times the number it saw in 1998.

A daily struggle

Of Virginia Garcia's 30,000 patients, about half are uninsured; 73 percent of them live in poverty. Estimates put the uninsured population in Washington and Yamhill counties at 90,000.

Those numbers are a daily struggle for Vicki Pedraza, manager of the Hillsboro clinic, where she has worked for 12 years. The clinic sees 100 to 200 people daily and is so busy it frequently turns away people seeking appointments.

"We say, 'I'm sorry, we're not taking new patients right now,' and they say, 'Well, what? Do you expect me to die?'" Pedraza says. "It's so hard."

She remembers being on the other end of the conversation. Before joining Virginia Garcia, she worked as an elementary teacher and used to call the agency to make appointments for students. She recalls her frustration when clinic workers would tell her the schedule was booked.

But, she reminds herself, health care access is a community problem, a federal problem, even an international problem.

Virginia Garcia officials are eager for federal health care reform they hope will relieve pressure on the organization.

"All we can do is what we do every day," Pedraza says.

Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center

What: Nonprofit that provides health care to uninsured and poor populations, 65 percent of them Latino, in Washington and Yamhill counties

Where: Clinics in Beaverton, Cornelius, Hillsboro and McMinnville; dental care in Cornelius, Hillsboro and McMinnville; Healthy Start clinic in Hillsboro; school-based health centers at Tigard and Forest Grove high schools.

Founded: 1975

2008 budget: \$23.3 million

Budget in 2000: \$3 million

Employees: 300

Employees in 2000: 55

People served in 2008: 27,000

People served in 2000: 7,000

Information: virginiagarcia.org;
503-352-8610

Meeting a critical need

Washington County would be lost without Virginia Garcia, says Kathleen O'Leary, manager of the county's **community health division**.

"They provide such a critical niche for access to health care," she says. "They're innovative, and they're always looking for a way to improve services."

The county has partnered with Virginia Garcia on many efforts, including H1N1 vaccinations. While the county has programs that provide immunizations, family planning services and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, it relies on Virginia Garcia to meet demands for primary and preventive care.

"Virginia Garcia plays an extremely vital role in the community," says Roberta Hellman, former community health division manager. "It's an agency that's had tremendous pressures on it, and those have grown in the last five years."

Keeping momentum

The only question is if Virginia Garcia can keep up with still-increasing demand. About 19 percent of the agency's \$23.3 million budget is funded by grants. Another 76 percent is funded by fees for services. The remaining 5 percent is raised by the Virginia Garcia Memorial Foundation.

Anderson, of the Oregon Community Foundation, says Virginia Garcia has the sophisticated management structure needed to handle continued growth, as well as support from the private donors.

Muñoz says partnerships with other health-care providers, including **Pacific University, Tuality** and **Kaiser**, are crucial to maintaining the agency's level of service.

He hopes the support is enough, because the clinic network has almost reached capacity in the number of patients it can handle. And the demand for services is still growing.

"It's very rewarding to see the growth," Muñoz says. "We're able to address some of the real critical access needs that we have in the community."

-- **Ellen Gilmer**