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Seattle clinic offers free health care for anyone who can wait in line

By [Ava Glaspell](#) and [Matteah Davis](#)



Natalia Bobii from Indonesia has her teeth cleaned by dental hygienist Kathryn Anderson at the Seattle/King County Clinic's free health clinic at the Seattle Center on Thursday. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

Victoria Cole and her service dog, Beau, got in line at 4:15 a.m. Thursday for the 10th annual [Seattle/King County Clinic](#). They waited for nearly seven hours at Seattle Center for a visit with an optometrist at the largest community-driven health clinic in the U.S.

This is Cole's second year attending the clinic, a four-day event projected to serve about 3,000 patients and [save more than \\$2.5 million in out-of-pocket costs](#). People who struggle to afford or access medical, vision or dental care will receive free health care over the next three days.

Anyone can attend the clinic, as long as they are willing to wait in line. Clinic staff encourage people to pack food, comfortable clothing and any daily medications they need. Over its 10-year run, the clinic has served patients from 260 ZIP codes in more than 50 languages.



Romero Bucio, left, gets an eye check from Luke Harrison, a UW medical resident. Spanish interpreter Christian Cruz appears on the screen Thursday at the Seattle/King County Clinic. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

According to project manager Olivia Sarriugarte, about half the patients they see during the clinic are insured, but not enough to meet their needs. In addition to poor coverage, complicated rules including copays, in-network vs. out-of-network providers, and mountains of paperwork can make using health insurance difficult.

This was the case for Cole, who has Medicaid. Instead of having to jump through hoops to receive proper care, Cole attended the clinic and got an eye exam, striking new blue frames, and an eye scan all in one day.

If you go

Patients will be assisted on a first-come, first-served basis each day starting at 5:30 a.m. Each person gets one ticket that can be picked up at the Fisher Pavilion. Supplies are limited, but people can attend multiple days if they go through the ticket process each day.

“This is so much more convenient,” Cole said.

The scan confirmed she was starting to develop cataracts. Sarriugarte said patients such as Cole are part of the “missing middle” — people who could miss diagnoses for serious conditions like cataracts because they struggle to use their health insurance. This also includes people who don’t fall under the annual wage cap for Medicaid. In Washington, it’s around \$20,000 a year for a single adult.

More than 6% of people in Washington didn't have health insurance as of 2023, according to [America's Health Rankings](#).

"A lot of who we see is working people, it's elderly folks who are on retirement or Social Security, and the gaps just aren't covering them," Sarriugarte said.

The clinic is funded through local grants and donations and runs on volunteer hours. About 3,000 volunteers donate their time to provide medical expertise, check in patients, usher them around Seattle Center, or interpret.

According to the clinic's medical director, Rick Arnold, patients come from all over the world to visit the clinic. Patients don't need to be a Washington resident, nor will they need to bring ID, proof of income or information about insurance or immigration status.

Arnold said his team was concerned the turnout would be lower this year due to fear that federal immigration agents would show up, but he found more interest than usual, especially in the number of volunteers.



Patients, doctors and medical personnel are busy Thursday in the dental area at the Seattle/King County Clinic. About 3,000 volunteers help run the free annual event. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

"I think probably as a result of what's happening nationally, our sign-ups are way up — more than we've ever had before," Arnold said.

Sarriugarte emphasized the importance of interpreters because language barriers can be one of the biggest challenges to receiving health care. The clinic provides in-person interpreters for

common languages such as Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese and Mandarin, and live translation for other languages.

Staffers recognize the clinic is a Band-Aid solution, and express hope for systemic change in health care access.

“The overarching goal of the clinic is to put ourselves out of business,” Arnold said.

For now though, the need is still high.

Staff reporter Kai Uyehara contributed to this report.

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