

Seattle clinic offers free health care for thousands

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Lisa Fiedler, left, and Mayson Marchant, right, dental hygienists, give Lilia Garcia, center, a teeth cleaning at the Seattle/King County Clinic in Seattle on Thursday, April 23, 2026. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)



By **David Gutman**

Seattle Times staff reporter

The line began forming, almost inconceivably, at 11 Wednesday morning, 18 hours before doors would open.

By 9 p.m., 40 people were waiting. By midnight, the queue wrapped all the way around Fisher Pavilion, the Seattle Center banquet hall.

Hundreds of people waited, through the gloom of night and the sleepy dawn, not for concert tickets or a hot new restaurant, but for an X-ray, a root canal, a new pair of glasses; for someone to look at a rash, an aching hip, a sore back.

For four days each year, the Seattle/King County Clinic occupies a corner of Seattle Center, offering free medical, dental and vision care to anyone willing to show up and wait, first come, first served. On Thursday morning, the clinic's opening day, tickets for dental care ran out within 10 minutes of the 5:30 opening. Vision tickets were gone in a couple of hours. Medical soon after.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Seattle/King County Clinic

The clinic is free and open to anyone, first come, first served. It is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday and tickets for each day are distributed at 5:30 a.m. Registration is at Fisher Pavilion at Seattle Center, 200 Thomas St. There is free parking in the garage at 650 3rd Ave. N.

Demand for affordable — free — health care, organizers say, is greater than ever. And it is only growing. The Affordable Care Act, more than a decade in the rearview, ended denials for preexisting conditions. But it did not fulfill the promise of affordable health care for all. And as congressional Republicans have [declined to extend the law's subsidies](#), premiums have soared. Nearly 40,000 Washington residents lost their health insurance since last year, according to state data.

So Tamar Kirk drove through the dark from her home in Renton to Seattle Center on Thursday, arriving at 4 a.m. She is a mobile phlebotomist, traveling to homes, assisted living and senior facilities to draw blood and do other tests. But because she is a contractor, she does not have health insurance. She makes too much for Medicaid, but not enough to buy private insurance.

She is, in her words, “in the in between.”

She works in health care. But, generally, this is the one time per year she gets health care.

She's had pain in her upper back for years. It pulses down through her right arm, into her fingers. It's been acting up recently, worse than usual.



Su Barnes, X-ray tech at right, with Rod Seevers, X-ray tech in rear, arranges Tamar Kirk, center, for an X-ray on her spine at the Seattle/King County Clinic on Thursday. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

On Thursday, she saw a nurse, then a doctor. They thought she should get some spine X-rays. Radiology was set up in the bowels of McCaw Hall, in a rehearsal room usually reserved for the Seattle Opera's orchestra.

"Everything is so well put-together, everyone is so kind," Kirk said.

Julia Colson, who works for Seattle Center, founded this clinic 11 years ago and has run it ever since. It is, she says, the largest pop-up clinic of its kind — medical, dental and vision — anywhere in the country, serving around 3,400 people over four days.

"Our health care system is not always accessible for people in our community," Colson said. "Just the cost of living, people are having to make choices between food and rent and health care and so many other things."

Seattle Center provides the venue and helps set things up. But all the clinicians — all the doctors, nurses, dentists, hygienists, therapists, opticians — volunteer their time. More than 3,000 volunteers will work the event this year. All medical supplies are donated.



Sergio Lemus, left, gets his eyes checked by Dr. Marcus Turner, right, at the Seattle/King County Clinic on Thursday. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

A few blocks away is Amazon's gleaming glass and steel campus. Across the street: the Gates Foundation's boomerang-shaped headquarters. Signposts of Seattle's ascendance as a glittering — wealthy — tech capital.

Thursday is usually the slowest of the four days, said Olivia Sarriguarte, a project manager who helps organize the clinic. But they've never had people line up so early or run out of tickets so soon, she said.

"This year's demand has been really unprecedented," Sarriguarte said. "We were worried that the gaps in our health care system would be impacting the people we serve, and I think we're seeing that in real time."

More gaps are coming. President Donald Trump's big domestic policy bill, passed last year, [will force many people on Medicaid](#) — which covers nearly 2 million people in Washington — to work at least 80 hours a month or lose their health coverage. Other changes, including funding cuts, restrictions for non-citizens and requirements for more frequent renewals, are expected to further reduce health coverage.



Volunteer Kate Waterman, usually a nurse in the ER at Whidbey Health, left, helps Vita Kovalchuk, right, and an interpreter on screen speaking Ukrainian at the Seattle/King County Clinic. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)



Rachel Fan tries on eyeglass frames. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

Inside Seattle Center’s Exhibition Hall — normally home to trade shows and receptions — it is humming, quite literally. Dozens of dental chairs are spread across the cavernous room. And with them comes the constant, thrumming whiz of

dozens of scrapers, drills, sprayers, suction devices.

Lisa Beck is here for a cleaning. It's her third year in a row. A Marine veteran, she served nearly 20 years, including three tours in Iraq. But she hasn't always liked the care she's received from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"I'd rather just do this once a year," she said. You don't need an appointment, there are no barriers like in regular health care settings, "I don't think I ever even showed an ID."

She drove from Tacoma, arriving at 2 a.m. Once she got inside, she put her backpack under her head, lay across a few chairs and took a nap.

Before her first time coming to the clinic, she'd gone more than a decade between visits to the dentist. She'll be back on Friday for medical and vision checkups.



Dental supplies at the Seattle/King County Clinic. This is the 11th year the Clinic returns to Seattle Center. Led by Seattle Center and the Seattle Center Foundation, the Clinic brings together health care... (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ▾

A brown Lab, with a handler, ambled around. He is a therapy dog. His name is Ruffles. He was there to ease the experience for people with anxiety about seeing a dentist.

Signs hanging above individual dental chairs indicate the languages (in addition to English) spoken by the hygienists. An incomplete list: Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Russian, Punjabi.

Jeff Allison came to get fillings in two molars. Over a hundred people were there when he arrived at midnight, but "the people that are here are so thankful, they're all in a good mood."

Allison has dental insurance, but the deductible is so high, he said, "It's not even worth it."

With the fillings and two implants he needs, the dentists he's talked to — at least four of them — have told him it's going to be around \$5,000 out of pocket.

He waited for his fillings, wearing a "Happy Gilmore" baseball cap and reading John McPhee. He couldn't help but marvel at the scene.

"They're not getting paid for this and they're treating us like regular patients," he said. "They treat us like regular patients."

"The kindness ..." he trailed off.



Check-in desks line McCaw Hall during the... (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ▾

Next door, in the Cornish Playhouse, Hannah Phipps is waiting for an eye exam and a new pair of glasses. She got glasses here last year — sharp-looking pink frames that she described as “milky rose” — but she needs an update.

“Things start becoming fuzzy, you start straining the eyes a little, you just know,” she said. She walked from her home in Belltown, arriving around 3:30 in the morning.

She’ll get an eye exam, then choose frames (she’s looking for something durable), and then come back in a month or so to pick up the new frames and new prescription lenses.

Phipps has Apple Health — as Medicaid is known in Washington — but she can’t find any providers who will take the vision insurance that comes with it. And she has asked a lot. “Nope, no, nope,” they tell her. “So I’m like, ‘Alright, health fair it is.’”

“Any type of regular eye care would cost too much,” she said. “It would be way too much.”



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