

Where a Client Can Become an Employee

Neighborhood health agency offers family atmosphere to needy

By **ADRIANA JANOVICH**
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Valerie Hennessy came here as a client 17 years ago — and she just kept coming back, as a student, then as an employee.

She's drawn to the spirit of the place, its patients, the support, flexibility and feeling of making a difference.

"I like the missionary spirit, that neighborhood feel, the feeling of family," she says. "I feel like I grew up here. I came here when I was 18 or 19, and I've been here ever since."

Hennessy walked through the doors of Yakima Neighborhood Health Services just out of high school, a single mother of a disabled infant, her dreams of going away to medical school defeated.

"I was supposed to be going to a private Christian college, not having a baby," she says. But "here, people weren't judgmental. They were helpful."



HILLARY WHEAT/Yakima Herald-Republic

Alina Olsen, supervisor for medical assistants and health care information at Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, jokes with a patient while taking her blood pressure.

Instead of becoming a doctor, Hennessy went to school to become a nurse, returning to the clinic for her pediatric and public health rotations. Now 35, she works at the clinic, teaches nursing and has a master's degree. The daughter she brought here for Women Infant and Children

benefits is nearly 18.

Hennessy's story mirrors those of others who work at the agency, where about half of the 140 employees are or have been clients. They've received assistance like health and dental care and WIC benefits, food and formula.

Others have been helped in

other less tangible ways, through inspiration, encouragement and flexibility in work schedules to allow them to go back to school for more education and training.

"It's just become part of the culture of the organization," says chief executive officer Anita

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Monoian. "We do what we have to do. We adapt to school schedules. Eight-, 10-, six-hour days — we have just about every combination under the sun, quarter to quarter, semester to semester."

That institutional flexibility has allowed employees to rise through the ranks. People who started with little or no experience and education are now in leadership positions and hold degrees.

Alina Olsen, who grew up in Wapato as a migrant farm worker and had her first child at 16, started here as a medical assistant, later becoming a team leader. Now 35, she supervises the clinic's medical assistants and health-care information department. Her goal is to go to school to become a physician assistant before she's 40.

She remembers interpreting for her grandmother at doctor's offices as a girl, and says that's one of the experiences that influenced her to go into this field.

About 30 percent of the clinic's patients — about 500 a day — are monolingual Spanish speakers. Olsen says she uses her Spanish language skills at work every day. So does Natividad Mendoza of Outlook, who works at the clinic's Sunnyside branch.

Mendoza started there eight years ago, signing up women for federal benefits, and was later promoted to coordinator of the breast-feeding promotion program and a maternity case manager. She remembers, as a girl, going to the food bank where she now refers clients.

Originally from Mexico, Mendoza was a migrant farm worker who dropped out of school in 10th grade, got her GED and married at 19.

HEALTH CENTER WEEK

National Health Center Week, which recognizes the contributions of health centers such as Yakima Neighborhood Health Services toward meeting the needs of America's uninsured and under-served, begins Monday.

The Yakima agency, at 12 S. Eighth St., offers medical and dental care, maternity support services and childbirth education classes. The center offers discounts for uninsured and low-income families. Weekend and evening hours are available.

For information, call the center at 454-4143, or its satellite branch in Sunnyside at 837-8200.

"I didn't want to go back to field work," she says. "I was nervous because I was used to it."

But she thought she could help patients.

"I can relate to a lot of their stories," she says. "I can put myself in their shoes and I can honestly tell them things do get better. I feel like I am making a difference."

Today, Mendoza, 36, is five credits shy of finishing her associate's degree at Yakima Valley Community College, going to night school while raising three children with her husband. She wants to become a nutritionist or a counselor. And that means more school — at Central Washington or Washington State university.

She believes the health service will help her reach her goal.

"They're family oriented," she says. "They're very flexible."

Cindy Rios, who dropped out of high school and worked at Washington Beef before starting here 14 years ago, agrees. She says she arrived as "a diamond in the rough."

"I needed to learn skills and that's what I've done."

Rios began in transportation, picking up patients and taking them to appointments. A non-native Spanish speaker, she studied English "day and night for three months straight," becoming the clinic's first certified interpreter.

She took courses and got more training, becoming — among other things — a certified doula, or labor and delivery coach. For the past eight years, she's coordinated the clinic's OB department.

"I never thought I could do what I do," Rios says.

The 47-year-old credits the health service for its support and "the role models around me, all the nurses" for her success and for encouraging her toward her next goal: becoming a nurse practitioner. She has one more year at YVCC, where she's finishing prerequisites for nursing school. She and her daughter are in it together.

"That's what really motivates me, seeing my mom do what she does," says Katie Rios, 19. "I grew up around the clinic. I've seen patients cry and say 'I'm so thankful for what you're doing for me.' It's so motivating and uplifting. I want to do that, too."

As the nurses at the clinic are role models for Rios, Katie says her mom is hers.

"I've watched her start out," Katie says. "She's worked so hard. She managed three children, goes to school full-time and works full-time."

"If she can do it, I can do it."