

Richmond Confidential

New health clinic opens for Kennedy High students and South Richmond residents



The staff at Kennedy High's new school-based clinic includes, from left to right, nurse practitioner Kimberly Humphrey, registration clerk Valerie Estes, and health education specialist LaShonda Williams. (Photo by Bonnie Chan)

By [Bonnie Chan](#) Posted March 16, 2015 9:00 am

It's a sunny Thursday afternoon and the new health clinic at Richmond's John F. Kennedy High School is open for service. In an impeccably clean waiting area decorated with plants, a round table and a bright area rug, teenagers sit scrolling through their phones as they wait their turns, and *Ferris Bueller* plays overhead on the wall-mounted TV. LaShonda Williams, a health educator with Contra Costa Health Services (CCHS), leans over and checks in briefly with a young man sitting in a chair on the far side of the waiting area; he smiles and nods in response.

CCHS's newest school-based clinic, which opened its doors in early February, is a far cry from the mobile health van that it has replaced.

For three years, health services staff provided a wide range of health services to Kennedy students out of the van, which was parked on Thursdays in the school lot. But now, thanks to a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, they have a home in what used to be Kennedy High's unused daycare center. The new clinic boasts a registration desk, two exam rooms, a health educator's office, a lab, a waiting area and a unisex restroom. There's also a conference room, which serves as a school-wide community space.

“With the van, we could only have maybe two students waiting at a time,” Williams said. “Now we can do a five-student rotation, seeing three to four students with a couple of them waiting.”

Currently the clinic is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursdays and serves only Kennedy High students, but will expand over the next month to provide more hours as well as services to other members of the community.

The clinic offers well-child exams (annual child development physicals that doctors recommend until the age of 20), general checkups and sports physicals, immunizations, optometry, and a range of confidential services that include supplying birth control and testing for pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

Students sign up for clinic services using appointment slips, which they can drop into a locked box in the student lounge. Williams checks the box a few times a week and makes appointments with students by briefly calling them out of class to talk privately. But Williams said many students also use a more informal way to make appointments: by texting her.

“My work cell phone is public and it's posted all over the school, so students text me all the time, all night,” Williams said good-naturedly. “I've got to turn my phone off at night. It's just the generation we're in — sometimes they feel more comfortable texting me what's going on instead of saying the words out loud.”



Raquel Gomes, a CCHS registered nurse, cleans the lab at Kennedy High's new school-based clinic. (Photo by Bonnie Chan)

Clinic services are available primarily for students who are uninsured or who are covered by Medi-Cal or the county health plan; Kennedy High also has a Kaiser clinic on campus that is available to students covered by Kaiser Permanente. The two clinics often refer students to one another, Williams said. Insured students are encouraged to see their own primary care physicians so that the school clinic can be more available for uninsured and Medi-Cal students.

The clinic will also begin offering dental services — exams, cleanings, fillings and preventative care — beginning March 31, and is slated to begin offering pediatric services in April. The pediatric services will be available to the general community, which will make Kennedy High's clinic the first CCHS school-based clinic to offer health services not just to students, but to the surrounding neighborhood.

“It's an important asset for South Richmond residents,” said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia in a statement. “I'm glad the new clinic will mean more children and youth will have access to quality health care.”

Williams agreed that “students and families who live in the area are going to be able to access services more quickly and efficiently, with fewer barriers.” But Williams said the new clinic, along with

providing direct services, also performs a crucial function in destigmatizing health care for a historically underserved population.

“The clinic normalizes care because people come in on their own, and the staff is comforting and welcoming,” Williams said. “Historically in a lot of neighborhoods around here, there’s a distrust of large medical institutions, and that distrust gets passed around orally.”

Williams cited suspicion borne of historical injustices like the Tuskegee syphilis study, in which the U.S. Public Health Service studied the development of syphilis in rural African American sharecroppers for decades without disclosing syphilis diagnoses or providing treatment. Williams said she hears people continue to reference Tuskegee when they voice distrust of medical services.

“We work really, really hard on trust,” Williams said. “We visit classrooms at least three times a year, and talk about the clinic and what we do here.” And compared to the mobile health van, Williams said, the new clinic is also an environment that encourages patient comfort, which is important for the services they provide. “Patients sharing confidential information — all of that is predicated on how comfortable they feel, so we try to make this space clean and bright and not so clinical,” she said. So, for example, there’s a “big comfy chair” in the health educator’s office and decorative knick-knacks on the table in the waiting area.

Valerie Estes, the clinic’s senior registration clerk, is herself a graduate of Kennedy High and said that the new facility is a fantastic resource for students. When the clinic opened, “I was probably more excited than anyone,” she said.