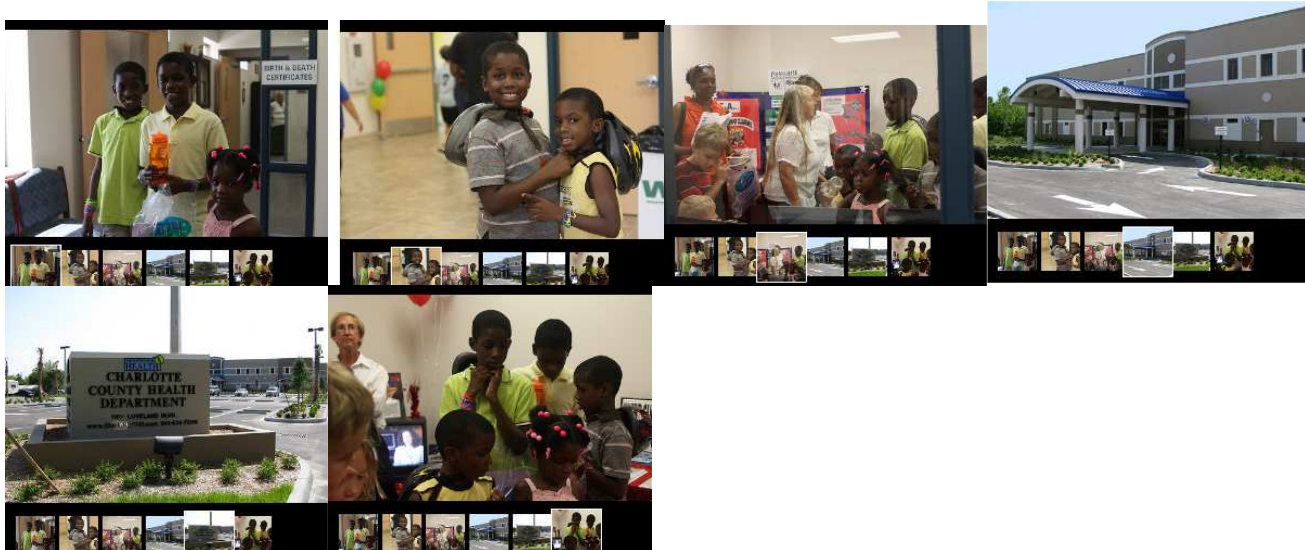




## Charlotte Health Clinic By Farah Dosani



PORT CHARLOTTE - The Charlotte County Health department celebrated the Grand Opening of its new clinic in Port Charlotte – and it couldn't have come at a better time. As the unemployment rate goes up, so does the rate of those uninsured. With no job and no insurance, more people are turning to public health clinics as their only alternative.

Marielle Eugene toured the new Loveland public health clinic in Port Charlotte with her five children who range in age from 3 to 8. Once in function, they'll be able to come here for primary care, immunizations, and dental care among other services. This clinic is much closer to home than the one in North Port Eugene used to go to. She turned to public clinics for her and her family's healthcare a year ago after she lost her job and her health insurance. "After I lost my insurance, I had a friend of mine introduce me to the clinic," she said. "I was ecstatic to hear about it, because I didn't know such a thing existed in the community."

According to its annual report, the number of clients seen by the Charlotte County Health Department in 2008 increased by 50 percent from the previous year. Public health clinics serve as safety nets in the community and serve more than 20 million Americans nationwide. Clinic fees are on a sliding scale - based on income and ability to pay. Patrons are often lower-income or uninsured with no other way to access health care. But the rise in clients is due to more middle class families, like the Eugenes, turning to these clinics. Administrator Steven Mitnick says the economy has much to do with it. "When you lose a job you have no income," he explained. "When you're wondering how you're supposed to receive services or how your children will receive services we're able to provide that service for them."

The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that 1 out of every 4 Floridians are uninsured – a statistic also reflected in Charlotte County. The number continues to increase with the rising unemployment rate. The foundation says that 85 percent of people who lose their job remain uninsured. So when the health department hears of businesses closing or downsizing, it sends representatives to inform workers about its clinics and services.

The new clinic in Port Charlotte is replacing a temporary facility that was established after Hurricane Charley in 2004. The storm destroyed 3 out of 5 of the county's public health clinics. The Loveland clinic replaces Port Charlotte's and a lot more. "We have 22 exam rooms that's replacing a facility that has 6 exam rooms," said Mitnick. "By [also] adding 6 dental chairs, which we have zero right now, it will be a very significant number we'll be able to serve." But more rooms and more patients, doesn't necessarily mean more doctors. Clinics statewide have been reducing their days of operation or closing all together, because they're unable to find physicians to staff them.

With healthcare reform and the push towards preventive care, officials like Florida Surgeon General Dr. Ana Viamonte Ros, who attended the Charlotte County clinic opening, say they see public health clinics taking on a larger role. "I think we're the leaders in that," she said. "We're all about prevention. Public health is preventing getting sick, promoting health, and thereby teaching the public. [It's] empowering them and giving them the tools to take it into their hands and live healthy lifestyles."

As Marielle Eugene finishes touring the building, she makes plans to use this clinic until she's able to get a full-time job and become insured again through her employer. "I have a large family, as you can see – I have five kids. With no insurance it would have been very hard for me to take them to the doctor and very costly as well. This clinic has helped me tremendously." She says she will schedule a general check-up for her and her kids as soon as the new clinic opens at the end of August.