

Watsonville clinic gets money for new AIDS program

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

By January, people who have AIDS or who test positive for the HIV virus will be able to get their needs taken care of at Salud Para La Gente in Watsonville, thanks to a recently awarded grant from an insurance company.

The clinic will match the \$25,000 award from Transamerica Occidental Life Insurance Company with money from its Patient Revenue General Fund. The money will pay for a full-time social worker and office space for the program for one year.

The social worker will be responsible for recruiting and training volunteers to work as "buddies" to provide practical and emotional support for clients, and will set up support groups and coordinate medical treatment with the clinic.

The award comes as a response to a proposal from the clinic to the Insurance Industry AIDS Initiative. The organization is a group of 134 companies, all members of Washington, D.C.-based trade associations, the American Council of Life Insurance and the Health Insurance Association of America. Members

of the AIDS Initiative have given \$321,778 in 13 grants this month. Salud Para La Gente is the only agency in California to receive the funds this month, said Richard Miranda, Salud's health education programs manager.

There are 16 known cases of AIDS in Freedom and Watsonville, Miranda said, but the number of people who are infected with the AIDS-causing HIV virus may be anywhere from 160 to 320.

While there is no cure for AIDS, various drug treatments are available that can hold off the

onset of some of the more devastating opportunistic diseases AIDS patients get. Experts are now advising people who are HIV-positive to get on the drugs even before they get sick, Miranda said. Having the new program in place will allow Salud to work with those people as well as with those who have full-blown AIDS.

Noting that Latino AIDS patients usually don't seek medical treatment until their disease is full-blown — and it's too late for much medical help — Salud director Barbara Garcia said the

clinic will be emphasizing early intervention.

"We'll be encouraging people to get tested," she said. "If the test is negative, we'll encourage them to continue safe sex practices. If it's positive, we'll encourage them to get into early treatment."

With the new drugs, Garcia said there's no reason for people to be dying of pneumocystis carinii (one of the major causes of AIDS deaths) anymore.

Volunteers will be an important part of the new program. A *comadre*, *compadre* program,

similar to the "buddy" programs that match volunteers with clients, will be instituted. The *comadre* or *compadre* will be available to the client and his or her family for emotional support and to help with practical matters, such as wading through Medi-Cal paperwork or picking up groceries. Peer support groups will also be organized.

The program, dubbed "HIV Client Care Services Project," is being set up as a yearlong pilot project. Salud will be looking for new funding sources at the end of the year.