Health care on the move
Mobile clinics provide free medical service to uninsured

Medical assistant Loretta Drennan takes a medical history on Jose Aguilera, 79, outside the Health Access Mobile Van during a stop at the Kennedy Community Center

Credit: Craig Sanders/The Record

STOCKTON - Almost every day of the month, a mobile health clinic parks at a school or community center somewhere in San Joaquin County. Recreational vehicles or semitrailer trucks are outfitted with exam rooms, a waiting area and small lavatories.

The medical staff ushers patients in and out with the same fluidity as attendants on a jumbo jet.

But this ticket to basic health care is free for those who need it.

Through these mobile clinics, people with no insurance or inadequate insurance can get preventative and minor services in their neighborhoods. That means antibiotics for pink eye, a flu shot or a referral to a doctor for high blood pressure. It can mean one less patient in a crowded hospital emergency room.

One phone call can help you find free or low-cost medical insurance for you or your family.

Nearly 2.9 million of California's estimated 6.6 million uninsured patients are eligible for government health insurance and don't know it, according to the Foundation for Health Coverage Education.

The California Uninsured Help Line -- (800) 234-1317 -- can help. The line is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week with live counselors and interpreters who speak multiple languages and offers basic screening for public and private low-cost health insurance.

Expect to be asked questions about your age, employment, numbers and ages of people in your household and any existing medical conditions. Based on your answers, the representative will tell you about your options and connect you to the correct agency and program representatives.

You can ask for a guide called the California Health Care Options Matrix, which is available in English and Spanish. It outlines all California's public and private low-cost health coverage options. With the chart, you locate your age, income bracket and other qualifying information, such as being pregnant or parenting children younger than 18, to determine which programs might fit your situation. Singles older than 18 who are working but uninsured can find some low-cost private health care options.

To print out a health-care options chart, visit the Foundation for Health Coverage Education at www.coverageforall.org.
Last week, Jose Aguilera gingerly picked his way up the steps into the Health Access Mobile Van, which was parked at Kennedy Community Center in south Stockton.

At age 79, he has "degenerative pain," said Lilan Durano, the nurse practitioner who examined him.

Aguilera's backaches are the result of years of picking grapes in the Valley, starting with the Bracero Program in the 1950s. There's not much more that Durano can do for him other than write a prescription for pain medication and give him a reassuring smile.

But that's enough.

Aguilera, a U.S. citizen, cannot afford to go to a doctor, even though he's on Medi-Cal, because of the $65 co-payment. At his age, he should already been on Medicare, but he never applied. Health Access workers recently helped him start the process.

Every month, about 1,000 elderly and working poor make use of mobile health vans for basic health screenings for cholesterol or blood sugar. Their children receive immunizations. The county operates two vans that do nothing but HIV and STD testing. Some provide vision screening, which is a necessary part of diabetes monitoring, and all of them push as much educational information out the door as possible.

Sophia Cano, 21, followed Aguilera into the Health Access van. She brought her 4-year-old son, Elias Orozco, in to have blood drawn. The lab work is required to continue receiving Women, Infant and Children services. Cano lives with her mother, who works for Financial Center Credit Union. As a teller, Annette Cano makes $26,000 per year and has health coverage, but she cannot afford to insure her daughter and grandson.

Sophia Cano recently graduated from a program offered by Napa-based Boston Reed College. Now, she's a pharmacy technician, looking for work, but she knows that by the time she lands a job and completes the probationary period, a year could pass before she has her own coverage.

About 84 percent of the people who are uninsured in the United States are working, Dr. William Plested, the president-elect of the American Medical Association, said during a visit to The Record on Wednesday.

"It's a terrible situation," said Dr. Felipe Dominguez, a pediatrician who frequently works in Kaiser's Community HealthWorks Mobile Clinic. "We live in such a rich country, and our health-care system is so broken. People walk around with a boil or an ear infection and tell me, 'If I had the money for the doctor, I wouldn't have the money for the medicine.'"

Kaiser's mobile clinic goes out once a month to three Stockton sites and just added Lathrop and Manteca to its route.