

The Health Clinic opens at Garrison Middle School, giving students access to care

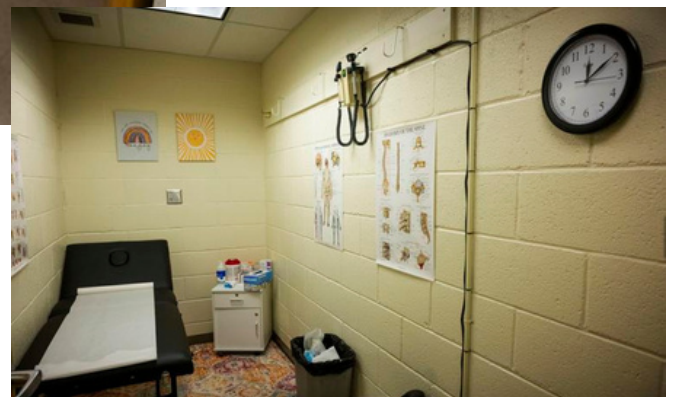
Loryn Kykendall | Walla Walla Union Bulletin | December 7, 2023



Care coordinator Mariana Saldana, left, and mental health therapist Delia Gutierrez at The Health Center clinic at Garrison Middle School on Thursday, Dec.7, 2023 | Photos: Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin



Mariana Saldana, right, chats with a nurse in the clinical room at The Health Center clinic at Garrison Middle School. Clinical Room photo below.



A sign introduces visitors to The Health Center at Garrison Middle School



The Mental Health Therapy Room at The Health Center at Garrison Middle School

All middle school and high school students in Walla Walla now have access to free mental health and medical care at school after The Health Center's latest expansion into Garrison Middle School.

The Health Center has supported Walla Walla schools since 2009 when its first clinic opened in Lincoln High School. Clinics now operate at both of the high schools and middle schools, offering services to students regardless of income.



Hernandez
Courtesy Photo

“My greatest hope is that by learning to access services at The Health Center, our students will learn to become strong advocates for their physical and mental health and wellness,” said Executive Director Norma Hernández. “By being able to advocate for themselves, recognize symptoms and know how to receive care, students will naturally grow with the skills and confidence we all need to become strong adults.”

Opening the new clinic at Garrison took two years of fundraising, grants from Sherwood Trust and funding from the Washington State Department of Health. Each clinic costs about \$150,000 annually to stay open, and The Health Center is an independent nonprofit completely dependent on the community's financial support.



Saldana

The clinic at Garrison is operated daily by care coordinator Mariana Saldana and mental health therapist Delia Gutierrez, who both started their positions earlier this year.

“What's great about the services here is that parents don't have to come and take their student out of school in order to get them into a medical provider,” Saldana said. “We're able to provide the medical services here.”

Photo: Greg Lehman,
Walla Walla Union-
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Hernández said The Health Center removes barriers that students might face when their parents don't have time to take them to an outside mental health provider or therapists' waiting lists are too long, which can cause a child's issues to become more serious and long-term.

“We have proven through our other school-based clinics at Lincoln High School, Walla Walla High School and Pioneer Middle School that students will utilize services more often because of the convenience and no cost of care, but also because we become part of their trusted community,” Hernández said.



Gutierrez
Photo: Greg
Lehman, Walla
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Gutierrez and Saldana emphasized the importance of students having people within the school that they can trust and feel comfortable talking to, especially when it comes to mental health issues.

“Depression and anxiety are the most common,” Gutierrez said. “But also communication — a lot of communication issues with parents.”

Garrison is currently seeing an increase in medical services, which Saldana said can be challenging with the limited space and staff they have.

“Right now, we’re kind of at capacity,” Saldana said. “So even a second therapist is something that would be very wonderful. Sometimes we have up to four students in here that need medical services and it’s hard to keep them all in one little spot.”

The two said they work hard to maintain healthy relationships with students and make sure they feel seen and heard.

“I know they always think that nobody is there to listen or to understand them,” Gutierrez said. “So I think my favorite part is being here for them, and just helping them with whatever issue they're going through.”

The Health Center is participating in the 2023 Valley Giving Guide, a nonprofit fundraising effort that lasts until Sunday, Dec. 31. The Valley Giving Guide puts several nonprofits and causes in the community in one place for people to donate. It is available at valleygivingguide.org.