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Detroit health fair unites Jewish, Muslim providers to help poor

Leonard N. Fleming / The Detroit News

Detroit—Wallace Shanklin, who is unemployed and lacks health insurance, said he was thankful for the free health screening he received Sunday at a health fair at the Muslim Center in Detroit.

What he didn't know was that the Interfaith Health Fair concept was born out of Muslim and Jewish organizations seeking better relations with each other and also hoping to give something back to the impoverished community.

"It's great because a person around here does not have insurance or a way to get the essential things checked like high blood pressure, sugar, cholesterol," said Shanklin, of Highland Park. "They have a regular clinic here, but this is even better."

Joint sponsorship

The Interfaith Health Fair was jointly sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Council of Islamic Organizations of Michigan.

Organizers said more than 120 people were screened Sunday, and more than 25 percent were found to need immediate medical assistance or a follow-up visit.

The organizations provided Muslim and Jewish doctors, nurses and social workers.

This is the second event in which the two faiths have worked together in Metro Detroit. Last year, Jews and Muslims joined on Mitzvah Day, which was also Christmas Day, to do volunteer work.



Razi Jafri and Alyssa McMillan hold signs promoting the free health fair, which helped more than 120 people Sunday. (David Coates / The Detroit News)

"We believe as a community we have to get to know each other better and lower any kind of misperceptions," said Abdallah Boumediene of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Michigan.

"And what better way to do it than join together in this kind of initiative."

More events in the works

Robert Cohen, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, said he was pleased with the turnout. Similar events are planned.

"There are things that push our communities apart but we have so much in common that we need to foster those things that bring us together," Cohen said.

"We have similar religious core values of helping the sick, for example, and the importance of preserving life."

Many of the residents who attended the fair were thrilled that they were invited to attend because there's a dire need for the poor to see doctors.

'It's very helpful'

"I don't have any insurance, so it's very helpful to me," said Anthoneria Drain, 51, of Westland. She is now an unemployed cook.

As for the two faiths hosting the health fair, she lauded the effort.

"It's very important because we've all got to survive," she said.

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