

Fostering Community Partnerships to Enhance Gender-Affirming Care in Rural Oregon

Since 1989, **La Clinica** has been dedicated to improving the well-being of Southern Oregon's diverse communities by providing culturally responsive, accessible, and affordable healthcare. Today, La Clinica offers comprehensive, prevention-focused services through an extensive network that includes eight neighborhood health centers, 19 school-



-based clinics, a student health and wellness center at Southern Oregon University, an outreach clinic at a shelter and resource center for individuals experiencing homelessness, a mobile health center, and a dedicated learning center.

Through its outreach programs, La Clinica extends essential care to some of the region's most remote and underserved individuals. To reduce barriers to care, La Clinica accepts all forms of insurance and offers a sliding-fee scale for uninsured and underinsured patients, with approximately 86,000 residents falling within their target population for medical care in the Rogue Valley region. La Clinica serves approximately 30,000 patients a year.

Expanding access to gender-affirming care in rural Oregon requires more than provider training or updated policies within a healthcare system. It requires building trust through intentional, sustained relationships and collaboration with communities and their allies. In recognizing this gap, La Clinica launched a comprehensive initiative aimed at increasing its capacity to provide quality gender-affirming care, with support from the Reproductive Health Equity Fund administered by Seeding Justice.

The Reproductive Health Equity Funds (RHEF) were allocated by the Oregon Legislature in 2022. These funds were designed to address gaps in Oregon's reproductive healthcare infrastructure

and expand access to the most vulnerable populations. RHEF provided financial support to projects, programs, and organizations focused on expanding reproductive health equity through four areas of focus: (1) provider workforce and other care investments, (2) direct support for people seeking abortion and other reproductive services, (3) community-based outreach and education, and (4) research.

With RHEF support, La Clinica's initiative was guided by four key pillars: education and training, direct services, community outreach, and infrastructure building. By prioritizing collaboration and education, La Clinica intentionally built an interconnected support system

where shared learning and advocacy created meaningful connections to improve gender-affirming care across the Rogue Valley region which spans Jackson and Josephine counties in southern Oregon. Moreover, by putting relationships first, La Clinica and its partners are advancing long-term systems change that extends beyond individual or institutional efforts. La Clinica not only expanded access to gender-affirming care services but also enhanced La Clinica’s internal capacity to deliver high-quality, inclusive care. This case study will illustrate how La Clinica looked beyond these pillars and its own walls to invest deeply in building relationships with local community organizations, businesses, healthcare providers, colleges, and universities.

This quote reflects the underlying reality and the urgent need for collective action.
“In a rural area... we lack resources [and] organizations that are ...visible [to underserved populations]. We are in a context where visibility is being smashed... [Feeling] affirmed and supported are absolutely crucial to the overall success of all the humans.”

A Relationship-Building Approach that Centers Learning, Education & Advocacy

La Clinica’s approach to gender-affirming care was deliberate and rooted in relationships, beginning with

humility and a commitment to centering people with lived experience. By listening closely to patients, providers, and community members, they gained authentic insight into the realities of navigating health and social systems. These conversations revealed that needs extended well beyond medical and mental health services, encompassing housing, social support, and affirming resources such as electrolysis providers. To deepen their understanding, La Clinica sought perspectives not only from trusted partners but also from organizations they had not traditionally worked with, broadening their capacity to respond in more holistic and inclusive ways.

With this knowledge, they shaped practices that were welcoming, responsive, and grounded in respect for the communities they served. Recognizing that no single organization could meet every need, they built intentional referral networks and partnerships to provide a collaborative web of support. Their model is anchored in three commitments: learning from lived experience, educating to strengthen cultural responsiveness, and advocating to expand equity and services. At its core, their approach to gender-affirming care is about building trust, fostering strong connections, and ensuring care that meets the full spectrum of community needs.



Strengthening Gender-Affirming Care Through Community Partnerships at La Clinica

The most impactful partnerships La Clinica formed were with community-rooted organizations and cross-sector allies who brought deep trust with the community, practical knowledge, and a shared commitment for improving care. One such organization was already well connected to LGBTQIA and Two-Spirit community members and served as a bridge between lived experience and clinical practice. Through this collaboration, La Clinica's staff gained meaningful cultural insight, including practical understanding of gender-affirming supplies such as binders and packers and how to help patients access them. Working together also led to improved service delivery, as the partners addressed billing challenges, strengthened quality standards, and created direct lines of communication that helped staff respond more effectively to patient needs. Additional collaborations resolved system-level

challenges and allowed direct connections between La Clinica staff and partners, which are subsequently described.

La Clinica also built a strong relationship with Southern Oregon University (SOU) and Oregon Health and Sciences University, which became instrumental in strengthening internal practices. SOU collaborated with La Clinica to update patient-facing materials, including informed consent documents, patient navigation guides, and intake forms, ensuring that language was inclusive and affirming. For example, a university provider suggested using “acknowledgement of information” instead of informed consent for documents because the prior was empowering, allowing patients to take ownership of their information. Therefore, there was a knowledge exchange in this relationship designed to increase La Clinica's capacity to provide quality gender-affirming care.

In addition to working with local community organizations and educational institutions, La Clinica forged meaningful connections with external healthcare providers and strengthened the relationship between those providers and Jackson Care Connect, Jackson County's primary coordinated care organization.

These relationships and open communication permitted internal La Clinica staff to contact them directly to troubleshoot procedural issues in real time, saving valuable hours and allowing them to meet patients' needs more quickly. Ultimately, by working together and seeking support from trusted partners, La Clinica moved away from just treating one aspect of the patient into a more robust form of care.

Outcomes of this Approach

The cumulative effect of these external partnerships resulted in improvements across La Clinica and the Rogue Valley community. La Clinica identified statewide experts in the field of gender-affirming care and hosted its first regional Gender-Affirming Care Summit, which included two focused tracks: one for behavioral health providers and one for medical providers. The event brought together over 200 participants, including community members, local professionals, and partners, for shared learning and resource exchange. The summit reflected the strength of these external relationships, with sessions co-designed and facilitated by representatives from local community organizations, educational institutions, and healthcare providers. This cross-sector event contributed to building a

shared and increased understanding of best practices and policies (i.e., House Bill 2002's connection to Medicaid, WPATH SOC8, etc.). These collective learning efforts enabled greater alignment across services, improving continuity of care for patients.

"I wasn't sure...how much the content would translate to things I could put into action ... with elementary, middle, and high schoolers. However...this [Gender-Affirming Care Summit] has already led to a couple of very meaningful breakthroughs with students...."

These partnerships did more than supplement services. They directly contributed to staff learning and organizational improvement through an interconnected network to better serve the needs of gender-diverse patients. Internally, La Clinica benefited from more efficient workflows. Staff experienced fewer gender-affirming care surgery delays thanks to their direct access to educational medical institutions that enabled them to develop clearer processes (i.e., letters requesting approval for surgery) to free up staff capacity, allowing more focus on patient care.

"[Now OHSU] look at our template for how we write our gender-affirming care letters for surgeries and things like that, and helped us update it to the correct terminology, updating it to the correct information on there so it's actually meets the requirements, and not just US typing something up saying, we think this works."

More importantly, La Clinica saw evidence of patient trust and satisfaction. Patients and community members, alike, reported feeling welcomed, affirmed, and heard. Some patients shared that they felt comfortable enough to offer feedback or advice to their providers, something that reflected not just individual confidence, but the broader cultural shift underway at La Clinica.



"By us connecting with local businesses and local organizations, of breaking down those stigmas, breaking down those barriers, making sure that everybody felt welcome and inclusive, then it creates a better community and sense of well-being for our patients overall, who are in the gender-affirming care group, any patient whose LGBTQ plus, will benefit from that greatly." This emphasizes that these connections help create a supportive environment where patients can feel safe, validated, and comfortable being themselves beyond just the medical clinic setting."

Conclusion & Reflections

The experience of La Clinica illustrates that rural healthcare transformation is not only possible, but sustainable when rooted in relationships. The relationships they built gave La Clinica the tools, knowledge, and community support it needed to grow from the inside out. Their partnerships helped staff feel more prepared, made systems more responsive, and ensured that care was informed by lived experience. They also reinforced that education is not a one-time training, but a continual process built on deepening relationships, connections, and establishing a shared understanding of what it means to become champions of gender-affirming care in Southern Oregon.

A key insight from this work is that no single person or organization can do this alone. Real change requires consistent collaboration, humility, and a commitment to growing together. By fostering strong community and partnerships and building advocacy from a place of shared learning, La Clinica created a model of care that is inclusive, community-centered, and applicable to other rural regions.



LA CLINICA

