



Community health centers offer care, even with no insurance coverage

Imagine you just lost your job. (For too many these days, this is not an imaginary scenario.)

You're sitting at the kitchen table with a notepad, thinking about evaluating your savings, keeping up with the rent, canceling the cable television, gathering the grocery coupons out of the mail that you used to throw away.

Suddenly, from the next room, you hear your daughter sneeze. That's when you remember – losing your job means your family will lose health insurance, too.

The ongoing national debate over health care reform is not an exercise in abstractions. It's rooted in just these kinds of stories. The number of uninsured Americans was already on the rise before the economic downturn. That's why elected officials, both Democrats and Republicans, have committed anew to finding a long-term solution.

But there's good news to share about the here and now. Community Health Centers are playing their long-standing role: serving as primary points of access to high-quality health care, regardless of a person's insurance status or ability to pay.

Community Health Centers, also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers, are nonprofit, locally directed providers of primary and preventive health care, other medical services and enabling services (such as application assistance for AHCCCS/Medicaid and discounted services). America's 1,200-plus health centers are "health care homes" for more than 18 million people.

Many health center patients are uninsured. Others have private insurance and choose Community Health Centers because they like the quality of care and the fact that every patient is treated with dignity. Still others have public insurance, such as Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). (The daughter in our story above may be eligible for CHIP, and the local health center can help the family find out.)

Fortunately, individuals who establish a "health care home" at a health center don't have to choose between access and quality. Community Health Centers emphasize both. The care provided at a health center is accessible because it is affordable (qualifying patients pay on an income-based sliding fee scale), it's culturally competent, and it's available in tough times. It's also of the highest quality, known for excellence in managing chronic disease and reducing health disparities.

Now is the time to talk about Community Health Centers because August 9 through August 15 is **National Health Center Week**. Recognition events and health fairs will celebrate the contributions of health centers in the more than 7,000 communities they serve, from city neighborhoods to rural towns and from homeless populations to farm workers. Community Health Centers should be celebrated because they are keeping our communities healthy and our economy healthy. They were among the first entities to receive money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or federal economic stimulus. At national, state and local levels, these federal funds exemplify the value community health centers (CHCs) serve, and how CHCs fit into plans for health reform. The funding is being used to provide care to more people as they lose their jobs and their health insurance. In fact, the \$367,000 stimulus funds received by Sun Life allowed us to meet increased demand for sliding-fee services.

By giving more people a health care home; Sun Life Family Health Center is saving health care costs and taking the pressure off of local hospital emergency rooms. But demand on our services will continue as the effects of the recession linger. The stimulus funding was the right medicine at the right time – but it isn't the cure. The cure is health reform, done right. A long-term solution is needed for the 50 million people who are uninsured and also for the 60 million people who are medically disenfranchised – shut out of preventive and primary care because they can't afford it, don't have insurance or live where providers are scarce or nonexistent. Undoubtedly, Community Health Centers will play a critical role in health care reform.

I would encourage you to visit the website www.healthcenterweek.org to learn more about what's planned for **National Health Center Week**. I would also urge you to find out more about Community Health Centers, become an advocate, support community health centers – visit <http://www.nachc.com/grassroots-advocacy.cfm>. Maybe you know a family like the one I described before. You can tell them about your community's health center. And with quality care that's easy to access, you might want to make your way to a Community Health Center yourself!