

Community Health Centers are Vital to National Health Care Reform

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With the current economic downturn, many community members have lost not only their jobs and homes but also their health insurance. Accordingly, CommuniCare Health Centers and Winters Healthcare Foundation have stepped in as the safety-net providers of primary care and preventive services for hundreds of newly uninsured families.

President Obama and legislative leaders have now put the issue of health care front and center, and we have a tremendous opportunity to fix and rebuild our broken health care delivery system. Over the next few months, Congress will be discussing and debating health care reform. In doing so, lawmakers should recognize and support parts of the current system that work – namely community health centers. Lawmakers must seize this opportunity to expand coverage to families that are currently uninsured by bolstering community health center capacity to meet the health care needs of our community members. We cannot abandon one of the most successful aspects of the health care safety net.

Our community health centers provide families with the convenience and added value of being a “one-stop” for their health care needs by having medical, perinatal and dental services on-site, along with lab services and a dispensary. Community health centers like ours provide a medical home — a place where you develop a trusting relationship with your medical provider, where you can go when you are ill or in pain, but even more importantly, a place to find the support of a health care team to help you remain healthy.

By providing a medical home, community health centers offer health care services that are comprehensive and provide a continuum of care. For instance, if you are diagnosed with diabetes, having a medical home enables you to develop a treatment plan with your provider (doctor, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, or midwife), talk to a nutritionist about your diet, and work with a health coach to set realistic exercise goals. If you are in pain from a cavity in your tooth, having a medical home enables you to get a filling. If you are an expectant mother, having a medical home enables you to get pre- and postnatal care, attend birthing classes and get

the caring support you need to help deliver a healthy baby. If you need a lab test or medication, having a medical home enables you to receive it at a low cost.

Research demonstrates that investment made in patient-centered medical homes reduces overall cost of care, improves health, and reduces health disparities. Low-income populations are the greatest users of expensive emergency room care for minor health care issues and the most likely to be hospitalized for preventable conditions. Our hospitals bear the brunt of these unnecessary costs. However, every \$1 spent in preventive and primary care saves \$3 - \$5 in health care costs. Community health centers have the capacity to transform the health delivery system by ensuring people receive needed care before they are so sick that they need hospital care. Medi-Cal patients seen at community health centers are 19% less likely to use the emergency room for avoidable conditions, 2% less likely to be hospitalized and, when hospitalized, are sent home sooner. People who have a medical home have better health outcomes.

Both Republicans and Democrats in Washington have recognized community health centers as a cornerstone of a more efficient and equitable health system. Funding under the Bush Administration enabled health centers to almost double in size. Funding from the Obama Administration's Recovery Act has provided additional funding for health center infrastructure. However, given the collapse of state finances and the ever-increasing number of uninsured families, our supply simply cannot keep up with the demand for services.

This year, National Health Center Week is being celebrated August 9th through August 15th with the theme of "Where Access and Quality Care Begin." The theme highlights the record of community health centers in providing affordable, high quality, cost-effective health care for all people, regardless of ability to pay. Community health centers continue to be a smart investment because they save taxpayers money, keep people healthy, and are the first line of defense in times of public health crises. We must take this opportunity to improve our system of care by investing in patient-centered preventive and primary care. It's time to recognize the powerful impact of community health centers on the overall health of our communities, and value them as a strategic part of a comprehensive health care solution.

CommuniCare Health Centers and Winters Healthcare Clinic are a part of Redwood Community Health Coalition (RCHC), a network of 16 community health centers in Napa, Sonoma, and Marin and Yolo counties. With a patient base of 150,000 patients, RCHC clinics are the medical homes for 1 out of every 6 residents in Yolo, Napa, Sonoma, and Marin counties. Here in Yolo County, CommuniCare and Winters Healthcare Foundation provide a medical home for more than 25,000 people and care for over 20% of Yolo County's children. For more information, please visit www.communicarehc.org and www.wintershealth.org.

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