

A HIP replacement to fix our broken health-care system

First in a series.

In state capitols across the country, including our own, governors and legislatures are struggling to find ways to fix our broken health care system. What happens at the state and federal levels will have an impact on our local health care system, but we can't wait for that process to unfold.

HIP: A Vehicle for Local Action

In Santa Cruz County, leaders of your major health care organizations have been busy trying to expand access, reduce costs and improve health care quality locally as much as possible. The vehicle for doing so is a unique nonprofit coalition of public and private health-care providers — the Health Improvement Partnership (HIP) of Santa Cruz County.

Launched in 2003, HIP is unique because it brings together health-care players who don't normally collaborate: competing hospitals, private physicians, the county's medical society, our unique local nonprofit health insurance organization, the county's Public Health department, local charitable foundations and safety net clinics that provide

high-quality care to people who would not otherwise be able to afford it.

HIP successes

HIP's members believe that local change is not only possible, but essential. Through collaboration, we've taken real, concrete action on issues that affect all of us and that far exceed the scope of any one agency or organization. Our efforts have helped improve care coordination, invested resources more effectively, increased communication and improved health care access and outcomes.

For example, we made an early commitment to work together on the problem of the uninsured. Working with our own members, the United Way, First 5 and others, we were able to launch Healthy Kids of Santa Cruz County, a locally funded and run program that provides health insurance coverage for low-income children whose families are not eligible for other publicly funded care (such as Medi-Cal or Healthy Families). Thousands of local children have been able to get access to timely, comprehensive health and dental care through Healthy Kids.

Project Connect is another HIP success story that might not have occurred without the spirit of cooperation we've built across our various organizations. It helps people who are repeatedly using the

emergency department for non-emergency purposes get the counseling, referrals and other services they need. With a very small staff led by the Homeless Persons Health Project, the program has significantly reduced emergency department visits, hospital inpatient days, ambulance transports and jail bookings — all extremely costly responses to health problems that can be addressed more cheaply and more effectively in other settings.

Challenges ahead

We're proud of these and other accomplishments, but we also recognize the tremendous challenges that lie ahead. We are fortunate to have 10 years of data about our county's health indicators, thanks to the United Way's Community Assessment Project (CAP). This year's report, which has just been released, shows significant progress in access to health insurance and to health care itself, which is great news. But CAP and other data also point to persistent and troubling trends: the disparities between north and south county are growing, the cost of coverage is going up for both employers and individuals, and many of the gains we've made are fragile at best.

Invitation to stay involved

In regular columns over the

next few months, we'll be sharing more examples of HIP's work to improve our health-care system at the local level, including what individual scan do to improve and maintain their own health.

To make Santa Cruz County a healthier community, we need the help of our fellow Santa Cruz County residents. The issues that HIP addresses affect each of our organizations, but they also affect all of us as individuals. Whether you're currently insured or not, healthy or not, in favor of various health-care reform proposals or not — no matter what, each of us has a stake in the quality and capacity of our delivery system as well as the health and well-being of our neighbors.

And that is HIP's commitment: to step out of our individual agency silos and partner with one another on solutions that benefit the entire community. We hope that our efforts will inform you and inspire you to become engaged in local opportunities for health care improvements, as well as the upcoming health care reform conversations that will be part of our lives for months to come stay tuned.

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