

Rama Khalsa and Pat Meehan: Health agencies building a stronger safety net

In 2014, our nation's new health care reform law will dramatically expand the number of individuals with insurance -- covering an additional 32 million people. In California, 1.7 million will be added to the Medi-Cal rolls alone the state-federal program that covers low-income residents. Here in Santa Cruz, where it is estimated that 50,000 residents are uninsured, at least 8,000 will be newly eligible for Medi-Cal.

For the most part, these individuals aren't currently accessing services because they can't afford them. Many resort to the emergency room because they have nowhere else to turn. Others forgo care altogether. In 2014, it is likely that these newly covered individuals will enter a physician's office for the very first time in many years, seeking help for complex, chronic, or other conditions they've had to ignore in the past due to cost. Who will provide their care?

One answer is our county's network of eight safety net clinics that collaborate to build a stronger, more comprehensive system of care for low-income residents. Formed in 2005, the Safety Net Clinic Coalition SNCC collectively provided more than 250,000 patient visits in 2009. SNCC includes: Cabrillo College Student Health Center, Diabetes Health Center, Dientes Community Dental Care, Dominican Pediatric Clinic, Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, Salud Para La Gente, Santa Cruz Women's Health Center and the county Health Services clinics, including its

Homeless Persons Health Project.

SNCC just released a Report to the Community that outlines a new vision to effectively serve all those newly eligible, potentially high-need patients in 2014. Clinic leaders envision serving more patients by increasing efficiency through greater coordination among all providers -- from primary care to specialists to hospitals and more. We also focus on prevention and early intervention to improve health. To achieve the vision, SNCC chose five action steps:

First, we will launch a collaborative quality-improvement process within the Safety Net Clinic Coalition to share best practices to improve patient health. This is an unusual venture among different, sometimes competing, health care organizations. But our members are willing to share key data aggregated, to protect patient confidentiality so that we can learn from each other about how best to increase immunizations, reduce preventable and costly hospitalizations, or help our patients effectively manage chronic conditions like diabetes.

Next, we will focus on an approach called the Patient-Centered Medical Home. This is a model of primary care that provides comprehensive, coordinated services designed to put the patient's needs front and center. Relying on case management to coordinate care within our complicated health care system, linking patients to other social services they may need, increasing insurance enrollment, and using health information technology will support this action.

Additional goals include replacing inappropriate emergency room use with better alternatives, such as urgent care and same-day services in primary care settings; expanding our capacity to coordinate the complex care our patients often need, including mental health and other services; and working to reduce the geographic disparities and gaps that persist in different pockets of our county.

2014 is right around the corner. SNCC leaders are preparing to leverage their resources, clinical expertise, and commitment to improving the health of a greater number of patients than ever before. In the end, our vision for an effective safety net system of care can help ensure a stronger, healthier community for all.

Rama Khalsa is the Santa Cruz County Health director; Pat Meehan is the Santa Cruz Women's Health Center's medical director. SNCC is a program of the Health Improvement Partnership and its report can be viewed at www.hipscc.org.