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COALITION TRIES TO PROVIDE CARE FOR ALL ; BUT CLINICS IN THE AWARD-WINNING PRIMARY CARE ACCESS NETWORK NEED A REMEDY TO KEEP UP WITH THE AREA'S BOOMING POPULATION:[FINAL Edition]
Richard Burnett, Sentinel Staff Writer. Orlando Sentinel. Orlando, Fla.: May 31, 2004. pg. 12

Full Text (1286 words)

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***** CORRECTION OR CLARIFICATION PUBLISHED JUNE 2, 2004
***** The quotations and identifications with two photographs accompanying the cover article on Pages 12-13 of Monday's Central Florida Business section were transposed. Dr. George Ellis was wearing the white laboratory coat; Mark Williams was in the dark suit and tie.

***** CORRECTION OR CLARIFICATION PUBLISHED JUNE 3, 2004
***** The cover article on Page 12 of Monday's Central Florida Business section about the Primary Care Access Network misidentified the entity that operates a health-care clinic for homeless people in Orange County. The clinic is operated by Health Care Center for the Homeless Inc., a local nonprofit group.

For the past four years, a loosely knit group of local clinics has gradually come to play a major role in providing health care to the region's uninsured. Waiting rooms have become jammed as the number of patients has jumped 700 percent since 2000.

Along the way, the network has received millions in federal and local funding, won national awards for innovation, and provided support for eight health-care operations across Orange County.

Amid the plaudits, however, the county's coalition of clinics for the uninsured -- known as the Primary Care Access Network -- faces a variety of tough questions about its operations as the region's uninsured population continues to skyrocket.

Observers say the network has significantly boosted volunteerism among doctors, put together a good referral system of primary- and specialty-care services, and increased health-care providers' ability to treat minorities.

It has even done what some said was impossible: It has brought together the region's two biggest and fiercely competitive hospital chains -- Florida Hospital and Orlando Regional Healthcare System -- to collaborate on projects serving the uninsured.

Still, the program continues to wrestle with key questions such as: What is the quality of the health care at its clinics? How effective are its efforts to relieve local hospitals'

emergency rooms by redirecting the uninsured to its clinics? How can its progress be documented?

The network's biggest reality check, by its own admission, is the knowledge that its efforts so far have been just a drop in the bucket. In Orange County alone, the network's affiliated clinics reach less than 20 percent of the county's estimated 175,000 uninsured residents.

"As the region's population grows, there will be more uninsured people, especially as employers reduce their health-care benefits," said Dr. George Ellis, chairman of the network and medical director of the Orange County Medical Clinic. "And as the word gets out more about our clinics, we will have capacity issues."

The program has assembled a board of major health-care organizations, from local hospitals to charitable groups such as the Winter Park Health Foundation. More than a half-dozen privately owned clinics have joined the network.

The original members were Orange County's specialty clinic, which provides cardiology, urology and other specialty care, and the county's clinic for the homeless. Both are located in downtown Orlando on Westmoreland Avenue.

Affiliates include clinics in Winter Garden, Pine Hills, Eatonville and Apopka owned by Community Health Centers Inc.; clinics on Alafaya Trail and South Semoran Boulevard in Orlando owned by Central Florida Family Health Centers Inc.; and an evening- hours clinic jointly operated by Florida Hospital and Shepherd's Hope, a religious charitable group.

The network also has worked with Shepherd's Hope and several other charitable groups in recruiting doctors to volunteer their services. About 800 doctors are now on board, 10 times more than four years ago; collectively, they donated \$2.5 million in uncompensated care last year, up from \$120,000 in 2000, county officials said.

As the program has grown, so has Orange County's financial support, which totaled \$15 million last year, according to Margaret Brennan, the county's health services administrator and project manager for the Primary Care Access Network. That includes money for both the county clinics and the private clinics in the network.

Brennan said it has been gratifying to see the region's hospitals working together to address some of the tough issues surrounding the uninsured.

"You see a lot of people coming together that normally you'd think would be very competitive about things," she said.

Hospitals, insurers, consumer advocates and others in the medical business have renewed their efforts to deal with the nation's uninsured as health-care costs generally have resumed their upward spiral in recent years. Many emergency rooms have become overloaded because they often serve as the No. 1 primary-care option for the uninsured.

Last year, Florida hospitals absorbed \$1.5 billion worth of health-care costs related to

treating the uninsured, according to the Florida Hospital Association. Those losses, in turn, contribute to price increases for the general population.

As Orange County's clinic network has grown, officials say, it is having an effect on emergency-room use. For example, preliminary numbers indicate that emergency-room visits by uninsured patients fell 4 percent last year at Florida Hospital's east Orlando site, according to Ellis, the network chairman. He noted that two network clinics are located near the hospital.

"Florida Hospital reported a decrease in level 1 and level 2 visits by the uninsured, which means they are seeing fewer scratches, sore throats and other types of nonurgent illnesses," Ellis said. "We think that means our clinics are making a difference."

Clinic operators said the network's financial support, community outreach and referral system have significantly increased their capacity to treat poorer patients. For example, Community Health Centers Inc., which owns four of the clinics, said it has seen a 50 percent increase in uninsured patients in the past five years.

"The uninsured patients have benefited because they have had access to primary and specialty care, that they would otherwise have gone without," said Mark Williams, executive director of Community Health Centers.

The county's clinic network received national attention earlier this year, winning a partnership award in an annual contest sponsored by the National Managed Health Care Congress, a trade group, and pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca. The award recognized innovative solutions to health-care problems.

"It was apparent that this model has been able to get people to set aside their turf battles and focus on taking effective action," said Les Meyer, a health-care consultant in Denver and chief adviser to the health care congress. "We need more programs like this to demonstrate that collaboration in health care does work."

Local officials are trying to get a better handle on just how well the county's clinic network is working. Various committees are trying to measure factors such as patient-care quality and emergency-room usage. Karen van Caulil, a network board member, is doing a study of emergency rooms near the affiliated clinics.

The goal is to create a network capable of helping the diverse population of uninsured residents, said van Caulil, executive director of the Health Council of East Central Florida.

"These days that runs the whole gamut of socioeconomic levels," she said. "In the past, it just meant the poor. Now, it also involves a good chunk of middle America that is uninsured, too."

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Dr. George Ellis BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: Mark Williams PHOTO: Discussion. Shari Hopwood, assistant director of pharmacy, talks with patient Patricia Cook at the Orange County health clinic last week.

BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: Advice. Rebecca Poston , director of pharmacy at the Orange County health clinic, explains a prescription to patient Paul Moynihan. BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: Part of network. Dr. Michael Ham-Ying examines Timothy Harris at the Pine Hills Family Health Center. BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: Cover photo of Lucas Diaz and staff pediatrician Debbie Andree at the Pine Hills Family Health Center. Photo by Bobby Coker of the Orlando Sentinel. Cover design by Eric Edwards of the Orlando Sentinel.

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