

The Future Role of Community Health Centers in a Changing Health Care Landscape

The following is a synopsis of “The Future Role of Community Health Centers in a Changing Health Care Landscape,” published in the January/March 2011 issue of the *Journal of Ambulatory Care Management*.



What is already known on this topic?

Dr. Jack Geiger founded the first “community health center” in 1965 to provide health care to low-income, minority, and disenfranchised populations in the United States. With support from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, Dr. Geiger and other stakeholders established health centers based on a South African model of care, which combines local and federal resources to develop a more organized system of community-based health care in urban and rural areas. The result was community health centers nationwide that serve 20 million people; 70% of patients have incomes at or below the Federal Poverty Level.

In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provided community health centers with a \$2 billion investment to meet the needs associated with caring for new patients. These resources allowed health centers to expand their services, hire additional staff, and open more locations. In only 15 months, these new sites provided access to care for 2.7 million new patients and saved or created countless jobs. In addition,

the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 provides \$11 billion to community health centers over the next five years to expand access to care.

What is added by this document?

Community health centers have become more vital because the Affordable Care Act focuses on two major challenges: the insurance coverage system and changes in health care delivery.

Insurance Coverage System

Insurance coverage reform will change how individuals obtain health care coverage. Medicaid will expand to cover all people age 65 years and younger who have incomes up to 133% of the Federal Poverty Level. As the percentage of Medicaid patients increases from 34% to 45% over the next five years, the percentage of uninsured who seek treatment at community health centers is expected to decrease from 38% to 22%. In addition, health insurance exchanges will be established to connect individuals and families who are not eligible for Medicaid to health insurance plans that emphasize preventive

and early primary health care. As a result, community health centers will serve more patients covered by insurance as well as more Medicare patients due to the expansion of new preventive care and the closing of the prescription drug coverage gap.

Changes in Health Care Delivery

The Affordable Care Act provides funding for new programs and demonstration projects that are promoting the medical home, a patient- and family-centered concept of care that can benefit community health centers and the patients they serve. The Act also provides grants aimed to improve the organization and function of health centers, such as funding for medication management services and community health teams. In addition, provider-led Accountable Care Organizations, in which providers make decisions and manage costs and quality of patient care, require a strong primary care foundation, which community health centers can provide to achieve cost-effective care.

What are the implications for public health practice?

Community health centers use a team-based approach to provide quality patient-centered health care in the most cost-effective manner possible. Health centers offer an

array of services, including case management, translation, health education, dental, behavioral health, and pharmacy. By providing these services, community health centers consistently meet or exceed national practice standards for the treatment of chronic conditions. Not only have community health centers been credited with reducing emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and inpatient stays, but they also have improved local communities by creating jobs and increasing commerce. In 2010, the economic impact of community health centers was \$20 billion.

What are the applications for these findings?

As community health centers continue to expand, they will make even greater contributions to access to care and generate cost savings and other economic opportunities in the communities they serve. The health care system can use best practices and lessons learned from health centers as it transforms into a more patient-centered, integrated, and cost-effective system. Thus, community health centers are poised to become national models for the delivery of quality, cost-effective health care.

Resources

National Association of Community Health Centers
www.nachc.org

Health Resources and Services Administration Bureau of Primary Health Care
What Is a Health Center?
<http://bphc.hrsa.gov/about>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Recovery Act Programs
Community Health Centers
www.hhs.gov/recovery/hrsa/healthcentergrants.html

Citation

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The findings and conclusions in these reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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