

Celebrate local health centers

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Sunday, August 3, 2014

Each year the second week in August is dedicated to celebrating the contributions of community health centers and the vital role they play in our nation's health care safety net. While there are many reasons to celebrate the work of CHCs, among the most important and unique is their long-standing success in providing access to affordable, high quality, and cost effective health care to thousands of financially vulnerable and medically underserved people in Nevada each year.

For nearly two decades, the centers affiliated with Community Health Alliance (formerly HAWC or Health Access Washoe County) have served residents in the Reno-Sparks area, allowing low-income and working uninsured patients in our community to pay for medical services on a sliding scale that is adjusted for income and family size. Indeed, all patients seen in CHA clinics are eligible for services regardless of insurance status

In addition to its four fixed-site clinics in Reno, CHA also operates four mobile medical/dental units serving residents in outlying areas of Washoe County and surrounding counties. This year, CHA clinicians and staff will log over 120,000 patient visits for a wide-range of services that include primary care and preventive services for all ages, dental sealants and other oral health care services, behavioral health care, lab and x-ray, and pharmacy services.

Likewise, the Northern Nevada HOPES community health center, which opened in 1997 as a clinic specializing in HIV/AIDS care, now serves the general population (ages 12 and over) in our community by providing comprehensive primary and preventive care, behavioral health care, social services, an onsite pharmacy, and social services. The HOPES clinic also continues to provide affordable HIV/AIDS care.

As is the case with all community health centers, clinicians at CHA and Northern Nevada HOPES are required to provide accessible, culturally competent care for our region's increasingly diverse patient population – in fact, both provide services in multiple languages.

With the uneven implementation of the Affordable Care Act in Nevada, there is a lot of confusion and misinformation about how the world of health care is changing around us. The good news is that more Nevadans are gaining insurance coverage and thus access to a regular source of care and needed services – community health centers in northern Nevada have seen a significant rise in patients with insurance, particularly patients with Medicaid coverage, and a corresponding drop in the proportion of uninsured patients.

The bad news is that there remain thousands of low-income and uninsured northern Nevadans who continue to face barriers to accessing primary care and other basic medical services. As such, the Community Health Alliance and Northern Nevada HOPES clinics will continue to perform key roles in our community's historically fragile health care safety net.

So let us take a moment to celebrate the accomplishments of community health centers in northern Nevada and to renew our commitment to strengthen and improve the availability of medical services to the least of those among us.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine