

https://www.montrosepress.com/opinion/opinion-community-health-centers-america-s-health-care-safety-net/article_668aa2a6-f462-11ea-8b2d-bb0c7ab29900.html

Getting on and Beyond

OPINION: Community health centers: America's health care safety net

By Pam Motley

Sep 12, 2020

Every year, millions of Americans forgo health care because they lack insurance.

In 2019, U.S. Census data indicated that more than 5,000 Montrose County residents were uninsured (12% of the population). Unfortunately, recent business closures and job loss due to COVID-19 have likely increased this number significantly.

Last year, Diane (name changed to protect privacy) found herself in this situation — going without health care because she didn't have insurance. Like many in our community, she and her husband both worked full-time at minimum wage jobs. They couldn't afford the cost of the plans provided by their employers. Even with cash discounts and payment plans, Diane just couldn't afford to go to the doctor so her diabetes went untreated for years.

When she began experiencing significant pain and new symptoms, a neighbor suggested she call River Valley Family Health Centers. Her neighbor explained that as a federally qualified Community Health Center, River Valley offers discounts via a sliding fee scale and the Colorado Indigent Care Program (CICP). On her first visit, an enrollment specialist helped Diane qualify for CICP.

After several tests and a colonoscopy at the Montrose Hospital, Diane was diagnosed with colon cancer; she underwent surgery and follow-up care. She also began to receive regular treatment for her diabetes at River Valley, including education and support on health eating and exercise from a patient health navigator. Now a year later, Diane continues to receive regular health care at River Valley. She is cancer-free and her diabetes is under control; she has lost 30 pounds and she was able to return to work. Luckily, Diane's cancer was caught in time.

Are you or someone you know delaying health care due to an inability to pay? Don't let a lack of insurance or financial resources prevent you from getting the care you need.

As a community health center (CHC), River Valley is proud to be a part of the largest primary care network in the nation. With more than 11,000 locations in every U.S. state and territory, CHCs form the backbone of America's health care safety net and play a critical role in ensuring everyone has access to high-quality, integrated care. Last year, CHCs provided services to nearly 30 million Americans, or one in every 12 people in our country. One in five rural residents depend on CHCs for their care. Nationally, 91% of CHC patients are low income; 82% are uninsured or publicly insured (Medicaid, Medicare).

To become a CHC, organizations must go through a competitive grant process and meet four key requirements: 1) Be located in areas of high need, designated as medically underserved; 2) Provide a comprehensive set of services including medical, dental, counseling and enabling services (including free transportation and translation services); 3) Accept everyone, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay by offering a sliding fee scale; and 4) Be a public entity or 501-c-3 nonprofit with a patient-majority governing board.

Once qualified, CHCs receive grant funding from the federal government that allows them to offer significantly discounted services for low income patients.

In addition to medical, dental and emotional wellness services, many CHCs provide treatment for substance use disorder and have been a vital part of addressing the opioid epidemic.

To meet our local needs, River Valley offers Medication-Assisted Therapy for opioid and alcohol use disorder — an intensive program that includes prescription medication and counseling.

In the past six months, CHCs have also played a critical role in the nationwide response to the coronavirus. Since early April, 2.9 million Americans have been tested for COVID-19 and thousands have received treatment at a CHC.

By offering comprehensive, integrated services under one roof, CHCs reduce barriers and help patients improve their health.

In fact, 2017 data showed that CHCs achieved better outcomes for patients with chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes, even while serving higher rates of complex patients, many of whom also deal with increased social risk factors. By providing on-going preventative care and thereby decreasing ER visits, CHCs save our health care system \$24 billion annually. They employ more than 236,000 people nationwide. River Valley has a team of 100 health professionals and support staff.

If you need affordable medical, dental, emotional wellness, substance abuse or pharmacy services, we are here to help! Call River Valley today at 970-497-3333. We have three convenient locations: 1010 S. Rio Grande in Montrose, 308 Main Street in Olathe, and 107 West 11th in Delta. If you live in the West End, you can also visit the Uncompahgre Medical Center, a CHC, located in Norwood (970-327-4233).

Pam Motley is a grant writer for River Valley Family Health Centers; pmotley@rivervalleyfhc.com, 970-901-9369.