

Community health centers can meet governor's goal

I read with interest about Gov. Tommy Thompson's Women's and Children's Health Initiative. The governor is looking at ways to ensure access to health services for an estimated 90,000 uninsured children and provide a number of women's health services in Wisconsin.

I believe the governor has a formula for success, with a few revisions.

The first initiative aims to subsidize health insurance policies for children through school districts or hiring a managed care company. While most people would agree that providing health insurance for children is good, most research and practical experience indicates this doesn't guarantee access to health services.

A vivid example is the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center lead screening study. We learned that more than 60 percent of the children screened had never been tested for lead levels, yet 70 percent of those children had health insurance, primarily through Medicaid.

The same can be said for immunization rates. Only 30 percent of children enrolled in the Women, Infant and Children's program were up to date in their immunizations. Yet, nearly 68 percent of families have health insurance through the Medicaid program.

Consider how this compares with rates for children who use community health centers throughout the state. On average, more than 90 percent of those children received lead screenings and are up to date in their immunizations.



ON HEALTH CARE

JOHN BARTKOWSKI

We can significantly improve public health outcomes and expand the delivery of health services to uninsured children by providing additional resources to existing community health centers across the state. The dollars would allow health centers to increase their capacity to serve additional numbers of uninsured people in Wisconsin.

REGIONAL HEALTH CLINICS

The governor also wants to develop five regional children's primary health clinics. The estimated cost of this initiative is nearly \$1 million a year. As the chief executive officer of a major community-based health center serving a large number of uninsured children, I believe this is a good concept.

However, reinventing the wheel is not a cost-effective approach to the delivery of health services to uninsured children.

A more reasonable, cost-effective and coordinated approach builds on the current system. Community-based health care centers are strategically located throughout the state. They are conveniently located in the neighborhoods where the patients live and have a proven track record of effectively using limited resources.

In addition, the governor wants to develop

a women's health check program for screenings, diagnostic testing and follow up. Are they effective? Absolutely. Community-based health centers currently are providing these services to great numbers of uninsured and insured women.

Health centers across Wisconsin are ready to build their capacity to serve the growing numbers of women the governor wants to reach. With additional state support, expansion of the existing, proven system can help the governor achieve his goal.

MAMMOGRAPHY VAN

Finally, the idea for a mammography van that would travel the state offering breast cancer screenings is an intriguing suggestion. The state has been helping subsidize such a van in Milwaukee.

The mammography van has been successful, but has also offered some logistical challenges. It's certainly worth studying the possibility of duplicating this process in other parts of Wisconsin.

While there are some questions related to the governor's initiatives, I am heartened and optimistic about his intent. The governor is to be applauded for placing women's and children's health issues among his budget priorities. Community-based health centers can be a vital and strong partner to help implement his initiatives.

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