

Caring for California's Heartland



Let's preserve our safety net in health care
By Dave Meadows and David Quackenbush
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There is a constant focus in media outlets on what they say is persistent tension in today's health-care system. Reports pit interests against each other, leaving the impression that all players are at odds and that no one is willing to work together to solve our most pressing challenges.

So it is especially gratifying to see two interests that the media would like you to think are blood enemies -- doctors and health plans -- collaborating in anticipation of the state's budget stalemate that potentially could leave hundreds of thousands of vulnerable Californians without health services.

Health Net of California, the health plan, is partnering with the Central Valley Health Network, providing short-term bridge loans to essential safety-net health clinics in Central California counties to help them meet expenses and keep their doors open as their Medi-Cal cash flow is stanching while legislators figure out the spending plan.

Of the 530,000 patients seen annually at the clinics, 77% live below the federal poverty level; 49% have Medi-Cal coverage and 35% are uninsured. Nearly three quarters of their patients are Latino and 40% are farmworkers. In many cases, the clinics offer the only medical care for miles around.

Rather than waiting for the inevitable crisis, we are joining forces to reduce anxiety in a difficult situation. Both of our organizations are based here in California, and we are relying on each other to combine resources and fresh ideas to target the California communities most at risk. And we are helping clinics that have a proven track record of helping their neighbors address and care for their health care needs.

During what's become an annual budget predicament, it is California's safety-net community clinics that feel some of the greatest financial impact. With no signed budget, the clinics face cash-flow interruptions that affect their ability to provide services to their most vulnerable patients -- families covered by Medi-Cal, other government programs or with no insurance at all.

For some clinics, it may mean temporarily closing because they do not have the financial reserves to weather the impasse. This would be especially devastating for Valley communities, where these clinics play a vital role in the local health-care delivery system.

These clinics provide a medical home, a regular and continuous source of care coordinated by a team of primary care physicians, for more than 500,000 patients. Closure -- even if temporary -- could devastate local communities.

We're not the only ones to know the crucial need for these clinics. Studies show that having a medical home means better health outcomes, including reduced reliance on expensive and maxed-out emergency rooms, fewer hospitalizations, lower overall costs and better preventive care.

Accessible and affordable health care is one of the greatest long-term challenges facing our state and nation. It is through collaboration and action, such as this partnership, that we take meaningful steps in the journey to making a real difference in the health and well being of our residents.

The doctors and medical professionals serving California's communities have dedicated themselves to being there for their patients. So it's only right to dedicate ourselves to keeping them there, doors open, ensuring the health of some of California's most important and medically vulnerable communities.

We urge our state leaders to work diligently and quickly to solve the budget situation. In the long-term, we look forward to working with them, community-based organizations and our colleagues in the health-care system to better meet the public sector needs for affordable and accessible health care.

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