

CSBG SPOTLIGHT: COMMUNITY MEDICAL SERVICES

By Gretchen Knowlton

Communities around the nation struggle with the lack of affordable health care. Fayette County in Pennsylvania is no exception. In fact, several communities in the county are designated either medically underserved or Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). This places a particular burden on low-income residents. That's why Fayette County Community Action Agency, in Uniontown, decided it was time to step in and find a way to make health care accessible to all community members.

In 1997, Community Medical Services (CMS) opened its doors to the public with a mission of providing comprehensive and preventive health care for all residents, regardless of income. CMS is affiliated with Fayette County CAA but is a freestanding corporation that will become self-sustaining over time.

This primary care center provides a full range of medical services including immunizations, regular exams, treatment of chronic conditions and blood tests. CMS accepts all major health plans from private insurers to Medicare and Medical Assistance. For patients without health insurance, there is a sliding fee scale based on income. The team of clinical health professionals is lead by Dr. Kaushik, who is board certified in Internal Medicine.

When it established CMS, Fayette County CAA wanted to ensure that services were as accessible as possible. For this reason, medical services are available to all residents of the community regardless of insurance type or income. To meet the needs of working patients CMS is open some weekends and evenings in addition to daytime hours. Because CMS is located in the same building as Fayette County CAA, patients have convenient access to other services provided by the CAA.

GETTING STARTED

Fayette County CAA first took up the challenge of opening a medical center about seven years ago when it became clear that the lack of medical services in the county was a serious burden for CAA clients. Very few providers in the community accepted Medicare and Medicaid and uninsured patients had few places to turn. Many CAA clients simply were not receiving medical care.

The decision to offer medical services in addition to traditional human services seemed to be a natural progression for Fayette County CAA. According to executive director, Jim Stark, "Health care is such a major issue for our clients that it's important for us to build close relationships between community action and community health care."

Though Fayette County CAA was already well established in the community as a provider of social services, venturing into health services was an entirely new undertaking with its own unique challenges. The planning stage, which took approximately three and a half years, involved building up the financial and human capital needed to establish the medical facility. Because the lag time between service and insurance reimbursement can be as much as six months, the cash flow system

had to be well planned out in advance. Hiring and training staff to handle the multitude of insurance and health department regulations and requirements was also a major component of this phase.

In order to finance the high costs of getting CMS started, Fayette County CAA leveraged funds from the Pennsylvania Department of Health and from several private foundations. The CAA provided additional support through no-interest loans. The community was also very supportive of CMS and even before it opened its doors local businesses and individuals offered their support with furniture and donations of office equipment. Two retired physicians volunteer their time and medical expertise to the clinic on an as-needed basis, which helps CMS to meet the high demand for medical care.

CMS is a designated Federally Qualified Health Center Look-alike, which qualifies them for cost-based Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement rates which are higher than traditional rates. The requirements to qualify for this status include a board structure that has a high degree of consumer involvement. Because CMS is affiliated with Fayette County CAA, which has a similar board structure, this was a very natural fit. The higher reimbursement rates help offset the costs of operating the medical center and providing care for uninsured patients.

CSBG funds make it possible for CMS to offer a sliding fee scale to patients who are uninsured. Approximately 8 percent of all patients fall into this category. Because CSBG funds support this significant operating expense, CMS has been able to maintain its commitment to serving low-income patients and to expand its service.

EXPANSION

Since it opened, CMS has experienced an increasing demand for its services. The medical center currently sees between 18-22 patients a day and almost all of these individuals consider CMS their primary care provider. Due to the great need for medical services all over the county and the success of the Uniontown CMS, it recently expanded service to a second location in Brownsville. This community was selected because it contained several municipalities and townships that were HPSAs.

Now that CMS has achieved a level of success as a provider of health care services in the community, Fayette County CAA is expanding services to include a dental clinic. Not only is dental care hard to find in the county, but also many residents don't have dental insurance and cannot afford to pay for dental care. To finance this new undertaking, Fayette County CAA applied for and received two large grants – one from a private foundation and another from the Pennsylvania Department of Health. The full service dental clinic at the Uniontown site will offer the services of a full time dentist and dental hygienist and will accept the same flexible payment options as the medical service. Expanding into affordable dental care enhances the CAA's commitment to comprehensive family health care.

As CMS becomes self-sustaining within the next year and continues to leverage private and public funding it will continue to increase services to the community. Fayette County CAA plans to expand services for both health and dental care into three more communities within the next year. Other plans include the addition of an eye clinic and expansion of dental services to include oral surgery. Through its commitment to the health care needs of the community, Fayette County CAA

achieves one of the primary objectives of community action: to assist communities and institutions in responding to the needs and interests of disadvantaged residents.

For additional information please contact Jim Stark, Executive Director, Fayette County Community Action Agency, (724) 430-3011 or email jstark@hhs.net.