

Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration
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Community Health Centers

Across North Carolina, communities have come together to form nonprofit health centers governed by the people that use them. For over 30 years these community health centers have ensured that no one is left without a place to turn to when they are in need of medical care, regardless of their ability to pay. The focus of community health centers is quality and comprehensive primary care with a strong emphasis on disease prevention and health maintenance.¹

What Is a Community Health Center?

Federally qualified health centers, also known as community health centers, are public or private nonprofit, charitable, tax-exempt organizations. They receive funding from the Public Health Service Act or are deemed by the US Department of Health and Human Services to meet requirements to receive funding without actually receiving a grant. They serve medically underserved areas and are governed by a board whose majority must be users of the center's services and representative of the service area's demographics. They provide, either directly or by contract, a comprehensive scope of preventative and primary health services including translation, transportation, and other support services regardless of the ability to pay. Community health centers have a schedule of charges designed to cover the reasonable costs of operation and consistent with locally prevailing rates that are adjusted based on a patient's income and family size.

Community health centers facilitate access to comprehensive health and social services including outreach, transportation, interpretive, and case management services; services to assist the health center's patients gain financial support for health and social services; referrals to other providers of medical and health-related services; and substance abuse and mental health services.

Community health centers assess the full health care needs of their target populations, form a comprehensive system of care incorporating appropriate health and social services, manage the care of their patients throughout the system, and maintain ongoing referral arrangements with one or more hospitals. Clinicians have admitting privileges and hospital staff membership at their referral hospital(s).

They assure quality special medical, diagnostic, and therapeutic services are available to patients through a system of organized referral arrangements. Community health centers form or join integrated delivery systems and provide comprehensive and continuous care including hours in which the health center is closed. They also educate patients and the community regarding the availability and appropriate use of health services.

Table 1. Federally Mandated Services Provided by Community Health Centers

Primary medical care
Diagnostic laboratory and radiological services
Preventive Services
■ Prenatal
■ Perinatal
■ Well child
Cancer and other disease screening
Immunizations
Screening for hazards
■ Elevated blood levels
■ Communicable diseases
■ Cholesterol
■ Eye, ear, and dental screening for children
Family planning services
Preventive dental services
Emergency medical and dental services
Pharmaceutical services

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Current Statistics

North Carolina's community health centers are comprised of 26 health center grantees, 1 migrant voucher program, 104 clinical services sites, 20 migrant voucher program sites, 7 migrant health center grantees, 3 healthy schools/healthy community grantees, 4 homeless health care grantees, and 2 federally qualified health center look-alike organizations with 6 clinical service sites. In 2006 there were 139 physicians, 80 nurse practitioners and physician assistants, 311 nurses and other medical personnel, and 42 dentists working at community health centers statewide. Those providers saw 333 283 patients for 1 109 600 patient visits. Of those patients, 52% were uninsured, 22% receive Medicaid, 71% live below the 200% of the federal poverty guidelines, and 54% live below 100% of the federal poverty guidelines. There were also 56 585 migrant and seasonal agricultural workers who received services.²

Within the past 5 year, community health center patients increased by 36%, patient visits increased by 36%, and uninsured patients increased by 53%. These programs prove to be extremely cost effective by serving these patients for just over \$1 per day per patient. North Carolina's community health centers also create jobs and an economic base. They employ more than 1692 full-time employees.²

North Carolina Community Health Center Association

Alone, community health centers would struggle for resources, training, and a medium to express their concerns. Collectively, health centers have banded together to secure their common mission through the North Carolina Community Health Center Association (formerly known as the North Carolina Primary Health Care Association).

The NC Community Health Center Association was created in 1978 so that health centers across the state would have a collective voice and representation at the federal, state, and local levels. The NC Community Health Center Association also seeks support from foundations, corporations, and other private entities to increase the access of primary health care to all North Carolinians. Its staff serves on state and national coalitions and task forces to foster collaboration, leverage resources, and avoid duplication of services.

The NC Community Health Center Association is a valuable resource to health centers, providing training and technical assistance in areas such as clinical service delivery, governance, workforce development, and administration. It regularly presents workshops, trainings, and conferences to keep health center staff on the cutting edge of effective and cost-efficient service delivery. The NC Community Health Center Association consistently analyzes key issues facing health centers and provides members with critical information in a timely fashion and helps communities to create new health centers or expand existing ones.

REFERENCES

- 1 About Us. North Carolina Community Health Center Association Web site. <http://www.ncchca.org/190598.ihtml>. Published 2006. Accessed October 25, 2007.
- 2 2007 CHC Fact Sheet. North Carolina Community Health Center Association Web site. <http://www.ncchca.org/238733.ihtml>. Accessed October 25, 2007.