

Allston clinic reaches out to immigrants, uninsured



By Julie Masis, Correspondent
GateHouse Media
Tue May 01, 2007, 09:23 AM EDT

Allston -

Even after the implementation of the Massachusetts health-care reform law — which will soon make health insurance mandatory for all state residents — roughly 50 percent of the uninsured will remain without coverage.

That's according to Liz Browne, the development director of the Allston-Brighton Joseph M. Smith Community

Health Center, the only federally recognized Allston clinic that treats the uninsured, discounts medical services for low-income patients, and does not turn away anyone with MassHealth.

Browne said that even after the law comes into effect, many people will not meet the eligibility requirements for enrollment. In particular, she explained, since enrollment in MassHealth requires a certificate stating that a person is either a U.S. citizen or a legal immigrant, undocumented immigrants will fall through the cracks. Even those who are in the country legally may find that MassHealth's documentation requirements are an obstacle, or might find their coverage terminated after falling behind on premium payments, she added.

To help all these people, as well as to those who might not know that they are eligible for a state insurance program or do not know how to apply, the Joseph M. Smith Health Center reached out to the community last week during the national "Cover the Uninsured Week."

Fliers in English, Spanish and Portuguese, inviting people to come to the clinic were distributed in local schools, Laundromats, banks, libraries, restaurants and beauty salons.

"We went out to the community and put fliers, especially in places that we think employ people without insurance," said outreach worker Francisca Guevara.

Last Thursday morning, the clinic's waiting room was full of adults and children, including a woman from Afghanistan in a black burka with a narrow slit for the eyes. Only her embroidered high-heeled shoes showed.

The Joseph M. Smith clinic prides itself on providing care to immigrants in their own native languages, even though medical translation services are not reimbursed by insurance companies. Still, doctors and nurses at the clinic speak Spanish, Portuguese, Thai, Russian, Vietnamese and Haitian Creole. About half of the patients are Hispanic, Guevara said, and most of the staff speak one other language in addition to English.

The woman from Afghanistan, and her three children, have been in the United States for a few months and they don't have insurance, Guevara said.

"Most of them haven't visited a doctor in years. I'm expecting a gentleman who hasn't seen a doctor in two years and hasn't seen a dentist in five years. He saw our flier in the Boston Public Library," she said.

Those who do not have health insurance might only go to the doctor when they are sick and may not return for follow-up once they feel better. Also, because they do not get regular medical care, if they have a medical issue it will not get caught early, Browne added.

But even for state residents with MassHealth, finding treatment isn't always easy.

Lynn Randall, 48, who lives in Cambridge and suffers from arthritis, a bad hip and mental health problems, said that she comes to the Joseph M. Smith clinic because she could not find a doctor in Cambridge willing to take her.

"It's difficult in the area to receive mental health care that accepts MassHealth," she said. "In Cambridge, there's no place I can go. A family member helped me hook up with services here."

Optometrist Leonard Contardo said that during the past week, he saw a 68-year-old woman with glaucoma, who also found her MassHealth coverage inadequate.

"She came back here because the prescription she was given was for a medication that MassHealth didn't cover," Contardo said, explaining that Xalatan costs \$56 for a little bottle that lasts only a couple of weeks. "Again she was going to be going untreated. The end result with untreated glaucoma is blindness. It's truly a sin because it's totally preventable."

So Contardo picked up the phone and called the doctor's office where the prescription was made to see if there was an alternative medication available.

"It's still pending. They're going to call me back with either a substitute, or I will fill out the paperwork for MassHealth to see if they will pre-approve the medication for her," he said.

These are the kinds of services that the Joseph M. Smith clinic, partially funded by state, federal and private grants, provides. It's not only about the medical help, but also about making sure the patients can afford to buy their medicines and connecting people to other resources in the community, such as child care or affordable housing, Browne said.

Although the "treat the uninsured week" came to an end, it is not too late to register. The clinic welcomes new patients every day, and offers vision, dental, mental health, diabetes, pediatric, gynecological and prenatal services. Those whose income is less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line may find their doctors' visits discounted up to 100 percent. People do not have to live in Allston-Brighton to be eligible.

For more information, call 617-783-0500.

<!--[if !supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->