

THE CATHOLIC REVIEW

Study finds difficulty delivering health care to poor

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While representatives of many of the city's community clinics and resource centers were inside Baltimore's Franciscan Center talking about the problems of health-care access for the working poor, the St. Clare Medical Outreach Van from St. Joseph Medical Center was parked outside on the street on one of its regular visits.

There was no irony in the scene, though. Traveling or fixed health clinics do what they can to provide stop-gap medical treatment for the poor but they are not enough to mend the increasingly large hole in the health-care net caused by a situation that is in itself ironic.

It's that while more low-income Baltimoreans are being enrolled in medical assistance insurance, it has become more difficult for them to get the care they need.

That was the conclusion of a just completed fourth annual survey or "health-care report card" conducted by the Open Society Institute and Baltimore REACH that examined organizations whose members include the St. Vincent de Paul Society's Beans and Bread and St. Michael's outreach centers and the Franciscan Center. The Open Society Institute (OSI) is a private, world-wide operating and grant-making foundation that has been active in Baltimore.

The survey, conducted by medical students under the supervision of the two organizations, found that despite an increase in the number of people who now get assistance, typically Medicaid, the percentage of people reporting difficulty accessing primary or other types of specialized health care is rising.

For instance, the survey showed, the percentage of those who said they had trouble finding dental care jumped from 40.7 percent in 2003 to 58.2 percent this year.

"Low-income Baltimore families are facing a healthcare 'Catch-22,' said OSI Baltimore program officer Dr. Thomas O'Toole. "More people are becoming insured, yet at the same time access to basic care is harder than ever."

He said the overwhelming reason for the lack of access to health care was its "unaffordable" cost. More than half of the respondents surveyed reported having a medical debt with the overall average debt level approaching \$5,000 a person. Yet the respondents' average annual salary was only \$9,948.

Dr. O'Toole said the problem is caused by the fact that more and more health-care providers are refusing to take medical assistance, while others are limiting the amount of services that they cover under medical assistance insurance. And, he said, there are hidden costs and charges associated with medical assistance that aren't being covered.

"That's what this study reflects, and that's the hole in the net," he said.

Larry Sigmon, a 50-year-old recovering heroin and alcohol addict, put a poignant personal face on the problem when he explained that medical bills he accrued as he was being treated for his

addiction are too high for him to pay. Even though he's now trying to make something of his life he said the consequence of his debt is that he cannot get credit and, he said, "you need credit to make it."

On hand for the news conference was Baltimore County Democrat, Del. Dan K. Morhaim, an emergency physician at Sinai Hospital, who said he regularly sees the consequences of the failure of primary care prevention and wellness when people end up in the costly ER because they have nowhere else to go.

"That's bad for everyone," he said, "and let's not forget that the health-care providers are being terribly squeezed by the system, too."

He said the health-care system is "burdened with bureaucracy and excessive costs" and that the only way to develop one that works for both patients and providers "is to get people into good primary care prevention, encourage personal responsibility, deal with the chronic problems of drugs and alcoholism and seniors aging in place, and deal with these things up front."

Stephanie Archer-Smith, deputy director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Baltimore, said she was not surprised by the results of the survey. "We've been observing this over the past year, and we're seeing more and more working people come through seeking our services," she said.