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## Opinion: Healthcare Network provides health care for everyone

Emily Ptaszek    Published 12:24 p.m. ET April 14, 2020

With unemployment on the rise, many of our neighbors find themselves without health insurance at a time when they need health care services the most.

As of April, unemployment claims in Florida since March 15 approached 600,000, and that number may be an underestimate due to the filing difficulties associated with overwhelmed processing systems.

The tragedy? The very pandemic that threatens our health is causing many to lose their health insurance. About half of Americans receive their health coverage through their employer.

While steps have been taken to ensure all Americans will receive treatment for coronavirus, if needed, other medical needs will not be covered by stimulus funding, such as children's vaccinations, obstetrics/gynecology checkups, management of chronic conditions, senior care, diagnosis of new issues and treatment of other illnesses, including the flu.

Equally concerning, in order to minimize the spread of the virus, routine medical services are being delayed, even as mental health treatment and stress management are needed by many to face this unprecedented and prolonged stressor. When the risk of the pandemic passes, there could be peaks of other illnesses and chronic disease related to deferred primary care and delayed mental health care.

Dr. Emily Ptaszek, CEO of Healthcare Network (Photo: Submitted)

Primary care is essential to a functional health care system because primary care providers are responsible for diagnosing, treating and preventing a wide variety of health conditions. While so much of life seems to be on pause, it is imperative that patients with pressing medical conditions continue to work with their primary care team to maintain their health. For those who have not yet established a primary care medical home, the time to research a provider is now, before you have medical need.

If you have recently lost your job or are without health insurance, rest assured that Healthcare Network is here for you. Since 1977, Healthcare Network has been committed to filling gaps in care by providing high quality primary medical care to our community, regardless of a patient's insurance or employment status. Our Sliding Fee Discount Program reduces costs to uninsured and underinsured patients based on their income and family size.

While we have had to change some of our procedures for the safety of our patients and staff, our practices remain open and we are still caring for the community. We no longer accept walk-ins to our centers, but instead ask patients to call ahead. In the coming days, we will also launch Telehealth services allowing us to virtually deliver medical and behavioral health services to our patients who do not require a physical exam.

This spring, Healthcare Network will open the Nichols Community Health Center in Golden Gate, the single most underserved area in Collier County. This new medical complex will offer comprehensive primary care services for all ages, including medical, dental, integrated behavioral health, and pharmacy. While it is a difficult time to open a new health care complex Healthcare Network recognizes the vital role that the new location will play during the pandemic and the role it will play in the community's recovery.

The expected surge in demand for services as well as the new center in Golden Gate increase the need for community support. As a non-profit, and the only Federally Qualified Health Center in Collier County, Healthcare Network is supported by a combination of patient reimbursements, federal funding, grants and public and private philanthropic support.

In 2018, Healthcare Network provided $10.3 million in uncompensated care. In 2019, 40% of the adult patients seen did not have any form of insurance, and 61% of children were covered by Medicaid.

We need your help to continue to meet the growing healthcare needs of our community. To learn how you can make a difference, visit HealthcareSWFL.org.

*Dr. Emily Ptaszek is CEO of Healthcare Network, which provides more than 200,000 patient visits in Collier County annually.*