

City health center

in spotlight

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MIDDLETOWN — Two Connecticut congressmen vowed Monday to fight for federal funding to keep Community Health Centers operating.

U.S. Reps. Rob Simmons, R-2, and Nancy Johnson, R-6, visited the city's

Community Health Center to tout President George W. Bush's budget, which would allocate \$1.293 billion for CHCs nationwide. That is a 124 million increase over previous years, according to a Johnson press release.

"Health care is a right not a privilege," Simmons said.

The two pointed to the access that

CHCs provide the poor and the uninsured in a time when the nation's health-care system is a hot topic in Washington. Congress is now debating legislation on patients' rights and prescription drug reforms.

Robin Hoffman, site director for the Community Health Network, and Mark Masselli, president of Community

Health Centers, Inc., said they are pleased with the congressional attention.

More than 500,000 people visit CHCs in Connecticut annually from 100 cities and towns, according to the National Association for Community Health Centers and the Connecticut Primary Care Association.

Hoffman, who oversees seven centers, said there is a pressing need for more funding of CHCs, especially in Middletown.

"We see a lot of the working poor [in Middletown]," Hoffman said, adding the seven clinics average more than 150,000 visits a year. Many patients can't afford

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insurance rates or can only afford to cover one or two family members.

She blames low wages for the lack of coverage. People working low-wage jobs often cannot afford to have even \$25 a pay-check deducted for insurance premiums, for even that amount must be used to pay bills or buy

groceries, according to Hoffman.

Johnson said CHCs are paving the way for a better system in America by providing more access to health care for more Americans. She said the center's ability to charge based on income and not service is an important factor in helping more people get the kind of medical treatment they need.

The kind of health care provided by centers should be embraced by the entire health-care system, Johnson went on.

CHCs, with their emphasis on preventative mental and physical medical programs, she added, help empower people to take charge of their own health. The current health system, which only treats patients when illness occurs, Johnson said, is a failure.

"We must move from an illness/treatment system to a health-and-wellness system," Johnson pointed out.

Johnson vowed to fight to keep federal funding of CHCs

She said one of the biggest problems centers face is a lack of such funding, adding if CHCs received more, they could see more patients.

Simmons echoed Johnson's condemnation of the health-care sector.

Simmons is critical of a system that forces millions of Americans to seek treatment in emergency rooms because they lack insurance. He said he believed many serious medical problems could be avoided if

more people had access to health care through CHCs.

"This is a frighteningly ineffective way to deliver health care," Simmons said.

He also vowed to make sure the budgeted money would get to CHCs.

Alfreda Turner, president of the Charter Oak Rice Heights Health Center in Hartford, delivered a speech on the need for more funding of CHCs nationwide.

Calling increased funding a

wise investment for the future of America, Turner citing the following statistics:

Currently one in six low-income children receive their care from CHCs.

One in four uninsured patients get their care from CHCs.

Last year 400,000 pregnant women received care at CHCs, and the life expectancy of their children was greater than those uninsured and low-income families that did not use them.