



Tom Warren/The Middletown Press

Community Health Center dentist Dr. Carmelina D'Arro [left] speaks with U.S. Sen. Chris Dodd [D-Conn.] about the need for more resources at the facility during Dodd's tour of the center on Monday. With him are Vice President and Clinical Director Margaret Flinter and Dr. Katherine Schneider [right], director of Community Medicine at Middlesex Hospital.

Grant gives health program shot in arm

By JOHN CHRISTIE
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MIDDLETOWN — The lack of adequate health insurance has become as great an illness as any disease, infecting millions of Americans.

The Community Health Center, Inc. and Middlesex Hospital have been seeking to cure this malady for Middlesex County residents through a joint project seeking to increase access to health services for the uninsured.

Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., visited the center at 635 Main St. to announce a \$881,000 federal grant that will allow local agencies to increase direct health services and create a support care infrastructure to aid the county's uninsured.

Last May, the center and hospital applied for the grant awarded by the federal Health Resources and Service Administration and are now one of 70 separate Community Access Projects funded nationwide.

"We thought it would be a long-shot," said Margaret Flinter, vice president and clinical director of the center. "We're thrilled and excited. We're

in the process of hiring staff. I'm glad to see all our hard work paid off."

Part of the funding will go toward creating a network where newly hired eligibility workers stationed at health services throughout the county will work with uninsured patients, said Katherine Schneider, director of community medicine for Middlesex Health System, Inc.

The workers will help patients determine what public insurance they are eligible for, "because a lot of them don't know that they qualify for Medicare, Medicaid or the state's HUSKY program.

"If they are truly uninsurable we can help connect them with affordable services in the existing system, including primary care, mental health and substance abuse treatment, dental care and medications," Schneider said.

Because the funding is only for one year, the center and hospital will use most of the new money to "create a self sustaining infrastructure" bringing together agencies such as the Connection, Inc., Gilead Inc., the Rushford Center and River Valley Services to help patients get the care they

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need as soon as a possible rather than having to languish on long waiting lists.

"As a one-hospital community, we thought we could get our hands around the problem easier," Schneider said. "We hope to demonstrate that we can create a self-sustain system that will attract state and national interest."

The federal grant grew out of the monolithic crisis the United States is having with uninsured and underinsured patients, which has embroiled everyone from local doctors to Capitol Hill. "There are currently 44 million uninsured men, women and children in the United States," Dodd said.

In January of 2000, the state estimated that 14.3 percent of non-elderly residents completely lacked health insurance. While there is no exact number of uninsured residents in Middlesex County, Middlesex Hospital's three emergency room sites had over 8,000 uninsured patient-visits last year.

"Compared to similar people

with health insurance, the uninsured are four times as likely to delay seeking care for illnesses, four times as likely to use the emergency room as a regular place of care, and twice as likely to experience an avoidable hospital stay for a variety of common conditions such as diabetes, asthma and pneumonia," said Schneider, a practicing family doctor.

"Even for dramatic illnesses such as appendicitis, an uninsured child not only waits twice as long before seeking care, but ends up having to stay twice as long in the hospital due to increased complications."

Dodd said, "Compared to a lot of states, Connecticut is doing a better job helping uninsured residents, but we need to

do better.

"When we take someone who's uninsured and help them get back on their feet, we're helping the entire community. With only a small amount of effort and money, we get an almost immediate return back into the community," the senator said.

The grant also will go toward extending the Community Health Center's dental and mental health services and creating a network of caseworkers to guide local mental health and substance abuse patients with every step of their own health regimen.

The new disease management program is based on the hospital's highly successful AIR Middlesex program for asthma patients.

"Asthma is a chronic illness, but it's very manageable and in many cases hospital stays are avoidable," said Alison Yazmar, a registered nurse who runs AIR Middlesex. "After our first year, we saw a 75 percent decrease in asthma patients checking to a hospital and 100 percent of them complied with their medication routine.

"I had one woman who, when she started the program, couldn't walk a flight of stairs," Yazmar said. "After a year she hike up Alcatraz (prison), which has 17 flights of stairs."

Schneider said the project should be fully up and running by July, but residents wishing more information can leave a voice mail message at (860) 358-4858.