

Community Health Care joins program for poor

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Hartford — An agency that runs seven medical clinics across Connecticut, including ones in Groton, New London and Old Saybrook, has joined the state's new health care system for needy citizens, state officials announced Thursday.

The new program, which helps mostly poor single adults, started serving clients Oct. 1.

Middletown-based Community Health Center Inc. had previously refused to participate in the new State Administered General Assistance or SAGA medical program. The system replaces the old, more expensive fee-for-service program with a managed care-type plan that uses a network of designated clinics and physicians.

Community Health Center had claimed that the new system short-changes health care providers by reducing state reimbursement for services and capping overall expenses. There was also criticism that the Department of Social Services had not signed up enough physicians to provide adequate coverage, especially in rural areas.

But this week, DSS Commissioner Patricia Wilson-Coker asked to meet with Community Health Center's president and CEO, Mark Masselli, and the two discussed Masselli's concerns.

While no major concessions were made, David Dearborn, a DSS spokesman, said the agency did agree to try and address the lack of non-emergency transportation for patients — a program eliminated

from the state budget.

"We're going to look into the cost options and possibility of further non-emergency medical transportation," Dearborn said. "It's a commitment to look into it."

In a letter to Wilson-Coker, Masselli said it was difficult for his agency to stand alone while other health clinics agreed to the restrictions for the SAGA program.

"We are first and foremost advocates for our patients, however, and take comfort in the fact that our principled stance has yielded more focus and attention on this population, and the impact of these changes, than previously existed," he wrote.

Masselli's agency also operates clinics in Middletown, Clinton, Meriden and New Britain.

In August, Marc Ryan, the state budget director, accused Community Health Center of "holding this new program hostage." However, he said state officials were successfully lining up other primary care physicians and hospitals to fill the gap.

SAGA, which serves about 30,000 people, is fully state-funded. Besides health care, it provides cash assistance to qualified, very low-income, unemployable adults.

The state has contracted with Community Health Network of Connecticut Inc. to oversee the network of clinics in hopes of saving more than \$20 million in fiscal year 2006. Attorney General Richard Blumenthal is investigating whether the contract was properly awarded to CHN without any competitive bidding.