

[Home](#) » [Business](#) Business

Following the Money | How Stimulus Funds are Being Spent

Stimulus funds to spread a wider net

**Mark Hoffman****Mental health nurse Katie Despears (right) consults with patient Georgette Reid at the Health Care for the Homeless facility.**By [Guy Boulton](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: April 11, 2009

Community health centers provide care to nearly one in eight people in Milwaukee - and that number is likely to increase given the thousands of people who have lost their health insurance along with their jobs.

"We are seeing a whole lot more people who never expected to be in this situation," said Lee Carroll, executive director of Health Care for the Homeless of Milwaukee.

But the community health centers also are getting some help from the economic recovery act.

The four centers in Milwaukee will receive almost \$1.4 million from the stimulus bill to hire additional doctors, dentists, nurse practitioners, medical assistants and other staff.

In all, the 17 community health centers in Wisconsin will receive \$4.1 million to help meet the projected increase in people seeking care.

They will get more money later this year. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act allocated \$2 billion nationwide for community health centers. And only a portion of that money is to hire additional staff.

The centers also will receive money for expansions and renovations, to buy equipment and to help offset the cost of moving from paper to electronic health records.

Community health centers, located in rural areas or low-income urban neighborhoods, provide care primarily to people enrolled in Medicaid programs such as BadgerCare Plus and to people without health insurance, who pay on a sliding fee scale tied to their income.

The centers, which were expanded under the Bush administration, provide care to more than 16 million people nationwide, and they have become an integral but often overlooked part of the health care system.

One in three people in low-income households - those with incomes less than twice the federal poverty level, or \$44,100 for a family of four - and one in seven people in rural areas gets primary care at a community health center, according to a March report by the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured.

In Wisconsin, community health centers provided care to 200,000 people, including 73,000 in Milwaukee, last year.

The number could increase sharply in the coming year. Roughly 20,000 additional people enrolled in BadgerCare Plus, the state health program for low-income families with children under 19, in the first two months of this year.

The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured and the Urban Institute estimate that each percentage-point increase in unemployment:

- Increases the number of people without insurance by 1.1 million.
- Increases the number of people in state health programs by 1 million.

Those two groups accounted for roughly 74% of the patients at community health centers in 2007.

The money in the recovery act to hire additional staff was allocated based on the center's size and the percentage of patients who are uninsured.

The money to convert to electronic health records and a portion of the money for capital projects will be allocated using a similar formula. But community health centers also can submit proposals for grants to fund large projects, and the centers have their wish lists.

For example, Milwaukee Health Services, the city's largest community health center, would like to get money to help expand its main clinic at 2555 N. King Drive. The expansion, estimated to cost \$5 million, would add exam rooms and office space.

It also will seek money to help expand dental services at its clinic at 8200 W. Silver Spring Drive.

"We have hope, I'll put it that way," said C.C. Henderson, chief executive of Milwaukee Health Services.

Sixteenth Street Community Health Center hopes to get money for a renovation of the first floor at its clinic at 1032 S. Chavez Drive as well as money to improve the building's energy efficiency.

Westside Healthcare Association and Health Care for the Homeless also have their own expansion projects in mind.

The main goal of the stimulus bill is to pump \$787 billion into the economy with the hope that it will check the economy's nosedive, and the money comes with some taut strings. It must be spent in less than two years. And the community health centers will need to provide architectural renderings, permits, budgets and other details with their proposals for the large construction projects.

"They have to be extremely shovel-ready," said Stephanie Harrison, executive director of the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association, which represents the state's community health centers.

The centers also must show that the money to hire additional staff results in their treating more patients. The challenge will be finding doctors, dentists and others who want to work in rural or low-income clinics.

"One of the biggest fears is they are not going to be able to get the providers quick enough," Harrison said.

But the stimulus bill also allocated \$300 million to the National Health Service Corps scholarship and loan repayment program available to doctors, dentists, nurse midwives, nurse practitioners and other clinicians who commit to working at community health centers.

They can receive up to \$50,000 for an initial two-year commitment.

The loan repayment program should help with recruitment. And even with the strings, the additional money is welcome.

"We are just incredibly grateful for it," said Carroll of Health Care for the Homeless. "We are always saying, 'How we are going to serve the next patient?'" 

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/business/42831687.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.