



Health centers growing more slowly than planned

By [Guy Boulton](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Outreach Community Health Centers, which saw almost 2,000 additional patients last year, recently expanded its main clinic.

The community health center, formerly Health Care for the Homeless, is one of four community health centers in the Milwaukee area. All of them are expanding or hope to expand.

That was the plan under federal health care reform.

The law allocated \$11 billion over five years to expand community health centers. The goal was to prepare for a projected increase in demand from tens of millions of people becoming insured after 2014.

Community health centers, located in low-income urban neighborhoods and rural areas, were expected to double in size in five years.

That target now seems unlikely.

The centers are expanding but at a slower pace than initially planned. Federal budget cuts in the face of massive government deficits have reduced money available for expansion by \$3 billion over five years.

That has tempered the centers' expansion plans, said Stephanie Harrison, executive director of the Wisconsin Primary Care Association, which represents community health centers.

Uncertainty about federal health care reform - stemming from legal challenges and the presidential election - and the prospect of future budget cuts also are factors.

The centers provided care for 277,000 people in Wisconsin in 2011, up from 201,000 in 2008, when the economic downturn hit, according to the Wisconsin Primary Care Association.

The number of people treated at the centers has more than tripled since 1999.

Detailed figures for 2011 are not yet available, but the four community health centers in Milwaukee treated 77,856 people, or more than one in eight residents, in 2010.

Roughly one in four of those people - in Milwaukee and statewide - did not have health insurance in 2010.

Community health centers receive federal and state dollars to provide care to people without health

insurance on a sliding fee scale tied to income.

Many of the people who would gain coverage under federal health care reform are expected to become patients of community health centers. The law allocated \$9.5 billion for the centers to hire additional staff at existing or new sites. It also allocated \$1.5 billion to help offset the cost of new construction.

In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, however, \$600 million was cut from the community health centers' base funding of \$2.2 billion.

That left \$400 million, instead of \$1 billion, in new money in the 2011 fiscal year for the centers to expand their operations, said Craig Kennedy, associate vice president of state and federal affairs for the National Association of Community Health Centers.

This is in addition to the \$1.5 billion allocated for new construction. About half of that money has been spent.

So far, only two health centers in Wisconsin have received grants:

- Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, which has clinics at 1032 S. Chavez Drive and at 2906 S. 20th St., received a \$2.6 million grant to open a clinic in Waukesha. ProHealth Care, through the Waukesha Memorial Hospital Foundation, committed \$2 million to the project. The clinic is scheduled to open late this summer.
- Kenosha Community Health Center received a \$2.8 million grant to expand its dental services.

More money will be available in coming years.

The federal government is expected to award grants this year for the roughly \$750 million remaining for new construction. And \$600 million in new money will be available to offset the initial cost of hiring new staff, adding new services and opening new sites.

Nearly all of the community health centers in Wisconsin have applied for grants.

Clinic plans expansion

One of the most significant projects for Milwaukee could be Progressive Community Health Centers' request for a \$5 million grant to build a new clinic.

Progressive hopes to build a \$10 million, 42,000-square-foot clinic near its main clinic at 3522 W. Lisbon Ave. That clinic is 8,000 square feet.

"We really are at the point where we can't grow any more at our current space," said Sarah Andritsch, a spokeswoman for the community health center.

Progressive, which also has a clinic at 1452 N. 7th St., has expanded in recent years, hiring doctors and dentists and extending its hours. It now provides care for about 8,600 people, up from about 5,500 in 2008.

But a new clinic would enable it to double the number of patients it sees as well as expand dental services and offer new services such as behavioral health.

"There are certain things we just can't do now because there isn't enough room," Andritsch said.

It expects to hear in April whether its grant proposal has been accepted.

Reform's uncertain fate

Milwaukee Health Services expects to complete an expansion at its main clinic at 2555 N. King Drive next month. The project will increase the clinic's size by about 44%, to 38,264 square feet.

The project, which includes renovating parts of the existing building, is projected to cost \$6.2 million. It is being partly funded by a \$1 million federal grant.

Milwaukee Health Services, which saw almost 30,000 patients last year, and Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, which saw almost 31,000 patients last year, are much larger than Progressive or Outreach.

Outreach's recent expansion is modest. The community health center, which expects to see 11,000 to 12,000 patients this year, added 12 exams rooms. It also has hired new doctors and added a pharmacy.

So far, it hasn't received any of the money allocated under federal health care reform.

The community health center had hoped to get a federal grant to offset the cost of the pharmacy, said Lee Carroll, executive director of Outreach. It went ahead anyway when it didn't get the grant.

Outreach and other community health centers could have better luck this year.

None is moving quickly to ramp up for 2014, though. They know they could see more patients if health care reform survives the next year. But they don't know if that will happen.

"Nobody does," said Harrison of the state association.

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