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Local health centers anticipate more patients if bill's passed

By Jeffery Kurz
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MERIDEN — If the landmark health care reform passed by the House finds its way to the desk of President Barack Obama, health centers like Meriden's Community Health Center are going to be even busier.

"It certainly benefits the Community Health Center in that it will help those we see who don't have coverage," said Mark Masselli, president of Community Health Centers Inc., which runs health centers

throughout the state, serving about 75,000 Connecticut residents, mostly the uninsured or underinsured.

U.S. Rep. Christopher S. Murphy, D-5th District, visited the center Tuesday to discuss Saturday's passage of the bill in the House and its implications for Connecticut.

The gathering also included representatives from the Staywell Health Center, in Waterbury, and the Connecticut Institute for Communities, in Danbury.

"Saturday was a happy night," said Murphy. "You had

a real sense of history on that floor."

Murphy said it was also clear why it had taken so long, listing some of the major impediments to health care reform, including "a lot of vested interest in the status quo."

Also, "it's a very personal issue that's easy to politicize," said Murphy. "It's become easy for people who want to score political points."

The legislation appears to be on even rougher terrain in the Senate, particularly over

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U.S. Rep. Christopher Murphy greets Meriden residents Elias Flores, right, and James Marshalek in the lobby of the Community Health Center in Meriden Tuesday. Murphy was in town to brief representatives from other health centers in his district about progress on health care reform.

□ Health centers anticipate more patients

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the plan to allow the government to compete with private insurers.

Connecticut Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, and independent who caucuses with Democrats, has said he won't support a bill that includes a government plan. Lieberman could play an influential role in the Senate vote.

Asked how Lieberman could be persuaded to support the House bill, Murphy said, "I hope that Joe comes back to Connecticut and listens to people I've heard about health care."

Murphy said one of the reasons he supported the so-called public option is that it would reduce the cost of reform, by about \$110 billion.

The bill would extend coverage to 36 million uninsured,

Summary of the health care bill

The Affordable Health Care for America Act would provide quality affordable health care for all Americans and controls health care cost growth. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that it will provide coverage to 96 percent of Americans, that it does so under the \$900 billion threshold outlined by President Barack Obama, and that it reduces the deficit within the budget window and beyond.

bringing insurance to 96 percent of the nation's population.

Murphy told the gathering the legislation would also bring new funding opportunities and potentially new services to community health centers, including models for wellness and preventative care.

"We need to be ready for that vast expansion of insured," he said.

Most of the legislation would not take effect until 2013, he said, "because we need to ramp up our community health center system."

For many, community health centers have become the primary care giver. Masselli said one of the challenges of responding to the reform is that there are too few community health centers to handle the upsurge in the insured popula-

tion.

"People have assumed that health centers are a place of last resort rather than a first choice," said Margaret Flinter, vice president and clinical director of Community Health Centers Inc. "If they only come to us because we're the only place, they should go somewhere else."

The House legislation does not provide coverage for illegal immigrants, and does not allow the use of tax credit money to purchase abortion coverage.

Murphy said the task was to respond to criticisms that the plan calls for government-directed medicine.

"We're really going to have to stand up and defend public health," he said.