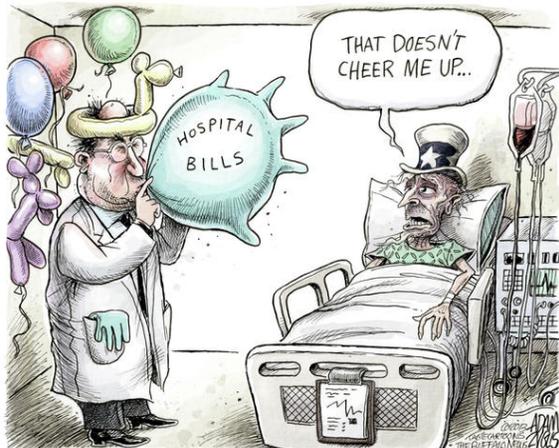


Health Leader's View: Putting community back into community health

By [Dayle Patterson](#) on Aug 18, 2017 at 12:30 a.m.



Adam Zyglis/Cagle Cartoons

This is National Health Center Week, and Lake Superior Community Health Center joins other community health centers in celebrating our contributions to the communities we serve.

Community health centers emerged in the 1960s in response to an urgent need for affordable health care, particularly in inner cities and rural America. Between 1970 and 1974, about 100 neighborhood health centers were built. Today, there are over 1,200 community health centers serving more than 25 million people in 9,800 rural and urban communities.

Here in Minnesota, community health centers serve over 170,000 patients, many of them uninsured or underinsured and more than 90 percent of them with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines.

In many communities, community health centers are the sole source of health care services. Even in medically rich communities like Duluth and Superior, community health centers act as a safety net by serving all patients, regardless of ability to pay. This prevents some patients from seeking care at more costly locations such as hospital emergency rooms.

Community health centers also serve historically underserved segments of the population, including homeless people, migrant workers, and those coping with HIV/AIDS.

Community health centers listen closely to the voice of the patient; those receiving federal-grant funding are governed by patient-majority boards. The centers rely on and foster partnerships with other health care providers, nonprofits, schools, and public agencies and officials. They seek out grant funding and private donations, and they find creative ways to share resources to provide high-quality care in a cost-effective manner.

According to a 2016 study published in the American Journal of Public Health, community health centers save, on average, \$2,371, or 24 percent in total spending, per Medicaid patient when compared to other health care providers.

In the Twin Ports, we are fortunate to have two robust health systems and an abundance of private-practice health care providers. So you might wonder if our community needs the Lake Superior Community Health Center. Absolutely. Last year we served approximately 11,000 patients by offering primary medical, dental, and behavioral health services at our clinics in Duluth and Superior. All patients are welcome, including those with medical

assistance, Medicare, private insurance purchased on the exchange, or commercial insurance offered through an employer. Patients come to us for a variety of reasons. For some, Lake Superior Community Health Center is one of the few locations where they can receive oral health care. Others appreciate our more intimate setting as they seek care for chronic disease management or other health care needs. Some appreciate our ability to offer same-week medical appointments, and others first came through our doors seeking help from our health care navigators to evaluate insurance options and then to enroll.

Recently, I was asked whether community health centers will survive if there are significant changes to health care funding. No one has a crystal ball, but I do know community health centers have been serving their communities for more than 50 years. Over the decades, community health centers have learned to be agile, to creatively partner with others to find solutions to community health care issues, to garner support from public and private funders, to listen to the voice of the patient, to adapt, and to thrive.

The Lake Superior Community Health Center has grown from a one-location, free clinic to a clinic offering multiple services in two communities to thousands of patients. And the future is bright. We are reaching out to schools, other health care providers, patients, community members, and others, asking them to tell us what they need so we can continue to grow and adapt.

As we celebrate National Health Center Week, we express appreciation to all of our employees, board members, donors, and partners for collaborating to meet the needs of the patients we serve. Whether you are a life-long patient or a community member reading about us for the first time, know you are welcome at Lake Superior Community Health Center — your community health center.

Dayle Patterson is CEO of Lake Superior Community Health Center, which has locations on Grand Avenue in West Duluth and on Tower Avenue in Superior.