

The following guest column appeared in the May 14, 2010 edition of the Wisconsin State Journal

Free health clinics will still be needed

By Dr. Michael Kloess

As a physician at one of Dane County's free clinics for the uninsured, I'm asked some variant of the same question nearly everywhere I go: "Didn't the president just put you guys out of business?"

Given all of the confusion and controversy that surrounded the health care overhaul signed into law by President Obama this spring, it's a fair question. Everyone wants to know whether there will still be a need for local people to step up to the plate and work together to provide compassionate care to the less fortunate.

Over the past year this question had been difficult to answer because so many complicated versions of the legislation have been floated. But now that the law is in place, we have a few more answers on exactly how health care changes will impact the nation's 1,200 free clinics.

For starters, it's important to remember that most of the substantive changes don't take effect until 2014 when the health insurance exchange program opens. But if you're uninsured, four years is a long time to wait to see a doctor. Free clinics will continue to be necessary to meet the needs of the more than 600,000 Wisconsinites who go at least part of each year without health insurance.

Moreover, it's possible skyrocketing premiums could actually lead to more Americans finding themselves without access to care. Most insurance experts expect premium costs to increase substantially over the coming years. And while the health care legislation does contain an individual mandate requiring most Americans to purchase insurance, the penalty for not complying starts at less than \$100 a year. It's altogether possible that many of those who straddle the poverty line will find the penalty more affordable than renewing their insurance contract.

One thing the new law will not do is establish "universal" health care. Even if the goal of providing coverage for an additional 30 million Americans by the end of the decade is met, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services estimate 24 million residents will still find themselves uninsured. And considering that legal challenges and other obstacles could further delay full implementation of the reform, local solutions will remain as necessary as ever.

So while free clinics remain essential to meet the needs of those in need, Americans should remember that these clinics cannot exist without their support. The health care legislation does not allocate any funding for free clinics.

National Association of Free Clinics President Danny Williams said the lack of funding appears to be an oversight. For the uninsured, it could be a costly and unfortunate oversight. In order to qualify for federal funding and remain financially viable, free clinics across the country are now considering

becoming federally qualified community health centers—a move that would mean charging for services they previously gave away for free.

While it would be a shame if legislation designed to help the uninsured ultimately forced free clinics out of existence, a lack of federal funding doesn't have to be a death blow to charitable clinics. I remain a firm believer that the local community is the best resource for aiding those without access to care. In fact, local organizations are uniquely positioned to provide creative solutions specifically tailored to meet the needs of their cities and towns.

So as you consider which nonprofit organizations to support in the coming year, know that your local free clinics—and more importantly, the uninsured men and women who depend on them for their care—need your help as much as ever.

Dr. Michael Kloess is the founder and president of Our Lady of Hope Clinic in Madison.