

## **Top Story**



### **Repairing safety net**

Dr. Robert Myers talks with a patient as registered nurse Polly Henry updates a chart at the Volunteers in Medicine Clinic recently. The clinic is free for patients who qualify.

Staff Photo by Kathleen Greeson

Monday, August 21, 2006

### **Repairing safety net**

#### ***Charity care providers, clinics step in to help the uninsured***

By Emily Berry Staff Writer

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the second of a two-part series examining changes to the TennCare health plan and the impact on Tennesseans and the state budget.

Before TennCare cuts were implemented a year ago, researchers estimated there were about 580,000 people in Tennessee without health insurance.

As a result of the TennCare program changes, another 170,000 adults statewide joined the ranks of the uninsured, including 7,349 people in Hamilton County, according to state figures. Those residents have turned to the same volunteers and public health providers who have cared for the poor in the past and now have stepped up to fill the needs of the uninsured.

The clinics and organizations working to assist low income and uninsured people in Chattanooga have had an increase in their patient loads in the months after TennCare trimmed its rolls, said Bill Hicks, executive director of the Erlanger hospital-affiliated Southside and Dodson Avenue Community Health Centers.

"The centers have served the least able, sickest people from their inception," Mr. Hicks said. "As people were removed from TennCare rolls, they came to the centers without coverage."

Rae Bond directs Project Access, an outreach program that provides specialty medical care to the uninsured. Project Access, like most of the clinics in Chattanooga, was started before the TennCare program cuts, but the disenrollments had a noticeable effect on operations, she said.

"The cuts have exacerbated the problems faced by the uninsured," she wrote in a statement. "There is no doubt that the demand for services has increased dramatically because of cuts in TennCare."

Charity care and sliding scale payment clinics have provided millions of dollars of medical care for the uninsured in Hamilton County since last year, records show.

"There is no doubt that Project Access and other charity health care programs have taken up the burden that TennCare dropped," Ms. Bond said.

"There is also no doubt that it is impossible for volunteer physicians and charity health programs to fill the enormous needs of people who were formerly covered by TennCare," she added.

Volunteers in Medicine, a faith-based clinic near Eastgate Town Center that provides free care for low-income patients, was in the works before TennCare cuts, but its May 2005 opening happened to coincide with a summer when many were removed from TennCare, co-founder Dr. Doyce Payne said.

"TennCare always had problems," he said. "We knew either before or after we opened that something like that would happen."

Nancy Franks, Chattanooga Volunteers in Medicine president, said the clinic's mission is broader than helping TennCare disenrollees.

"Probably only 10 to 15 percent of the patients that we see are TennCare disenrollees," she said in an email. "Most are the working uninsured who were never on TennCare, but they fall between the cracks."

Medical providers and volunteers who have seen demand for their help increase after TennCare cuts now are waiting to see if Gov. Phil Bredesen's Cover Tennessee initiative will help any of the people they serve.

"It is critical that Tennessee finds ways to provide reasonably priced access to health care for the working poor in our community," Ms. Bond said.

E-mail Emily Berry at [eberry@timesfreepress.com](mailto:eberry@timesfreepress.com) AREA CHARITY CARE PROVIDERS Project Access A partnership led by the Chattanooga and Hamilton County Medical Society Who qualifies: Adults living at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level who have lived in Hamilton County at least 90 days and who are without access to any other medical coverage.

First patients served: April 2004 Patient visits July 2005 to July 2006: 4,361  
Estimated value of care provided during that period: \$6.69 million

Erlanger Southside and Dodson Avenue Community Health Centers Two federally qualified centers operated under the umbrella of Erlanger hospital system Who qualifies: Everyone, with payment on a sliding scale First patients served: October 1968 Patient visits July 2005 to July 2006: 31,105 Estimated value of care during that period: \$4.8 million before reimbursement; after reimbursements about \$3.52 million

Volunteers in Medicine A faith-based clinic offering primary and urgent care to adults Who qualifies: Adults living at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level First patients served: May 2005 Patient visits July 2005 to May 2006: 3,128  
Estimated value of care during that period: \$1.4 million

Memorial Hospital Primary Care Clinics Two clinics offering free and sliding-scale care to families Who qualifies: Everyone, with payment on a sliding scale  
First patients served: January 1996 Patient visits July 2005 to July 2006: 17,000  
Estimated value of care during that period: Before reimbursements, about \$1.8 million; after TennCare and Medicare about \$900,000 Source: Project Access