

Health in Focus

SPOTLIGHTING INITIATIVES OF THE METROWEST HEALTH FOUNDATION

In this issue: Access to Care

Access to affordable, timely and quality health care is important for physical and mental health. According to Healthy People 2020, access to health services requires three distinct steps: gaining entry into the health care system; accessing a health care location where needed services are provided; and finding a provider with whom the patient can communicate and trust. Gaining access to health care affects overall health status, prevention of disease and disability, detection and treatment of health conditions, quality of life, preventable death and life expectancy.



The foundation's current strategic plan focuses on access to care as a top priority for addressing unmet health needs in the MetroWest region. In the past five years, the foundation has invested over \$3.8 million in its Access to Care initiative. The foundation's efforts have focused on health insurance enrollment, access to primary and preventative care, and workforce shortages.

This issue of Health in Focus will review what the data tells us about access to care in MetroWest, the accomplishments of the foundation's initiative over the past four years and some preliminary thoughts about the foundation's future direction in this realm.

What the Data Tells Us About Access to Care in MetroWest

While the vast majority of MetroWest towns have lower uninsurance rates than the state average, four towns exceed the average of 3.6 percent. Framingham's total uninsurance rate is 7.1 percent, followed by Marlborough and Milford at 4.9 percent and Hudson at 3.9 percent. Furthermore, all but Marlborough, exceed the state average of 1.5 percent for uninsurance rates among children under 17; Mendon and Hopkinton also exceed that.

Being insured does not always lead to health care access. The 2016 MetroWest Community Health Assessment found that the greatest challenges to accessing physical health services in the region were lack of evening or weekend services (30.9%), long wait times for appointments (27.4%) and offices not accepting new patients (23.2%). The greatest challenges to accessing behavioral health services were long wait times for appointments (20.4%), insurance coverage issues (20.1%) and lack of weekend or

evening services (15.5%). In addition, focus group participants reported that the top challenges for accessing mental health services were lack of providers, providers not accepting insurance and stigma.

Four Years of Access to Care Grants: Accomplishments & Lessons Learned

The foundation’s strategic plan called for the following goals in the Access to Care initiative: promote access to primary care throughout the region, specifically improving primary and preventative care capacity in high-need communities and improving access to primary care (capacity, insurance coverage and utilization) for minorities and other vulnerable populations. Since 2013, the foundation has supported several strategies that align with these goals. Highlights include:

<p>Insurance Enrollment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nearly 5,000 MetroWest residents enrolled or re-enrolled in health insurance through the Latino Health Insurance Program and MetroWest Free Medical Program Health Care for All trained 30 staff from 13 health and human service providers in insurance enrollment 	<p>Community Health Workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8,086 residents were referred to primary and specialty care through CHWs at the Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center, the Latino Health Insurance Program, Milford Regional Medical Center, and SMOC
<p>Medical-Legal Partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 292 patients of Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center in Framingham and Milford received onsite legal assistance from MetroWest Legal Services and Community Legal Aid 	<p>Behavioral Health Integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two bi-lingual Advocates clinicians provided onsite therapy and case management for 396 Southboro Medical Group pediatric patients 137 adult patients at the Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center in Milford received onsite behavioral health services
<p>Workforce</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center invested in recruitment and retention strategies to increase the number of physicians, physician assistants and nurse practitioners at both their Framingham and Milford sites 	<p>Prescription Medication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1,323 residents obtained free or reduced cost prescriptions through Natick VNA’s MetroWest Meds Program

Some lessons learned from these grants:

1. Enrolling residents in health insurance, while not without its challenges, is easier than enrolling them in primary care. Community Health Workers are limited in where they can refer patients when many practices are closed to new patients.
2. Community health centers face challenges in recruiting and retaining providers, especially those who are bilingual. The competition for doctors in the MetroWest region is significant, pushing salaries up and making it more difficult for safety-net providers like health centers to compete for providers.
3. While community health workers and medical-legal Partnerships have proven beneficial to patient care, sustainability of these efforts is of concern as there are few reimbursement mechanisms in place to cover these costs.
4. Medical practices that offer behavioral health integration models have found that physicians are more satisfied with the quality of care; however there continue to be impediments to maximizing reimbursement for and sustaining such services.
5. Efforts to alter the Affordable Care Act or change state funding for Medicaid could have a detrimental impact on the gains made through the foundation's Access to Care initiative.

For more information on these and other activities of the foundation,
visit our website at
www.mwhealth.org

METROWEST HEALTH FOUNDATION
161 WORCESTER ROAD, SUITE 202
FRAMINGHAM, MA 01701
508.879.7625
info@mwhealth.org