

F L O R I D A H O S P I T A L

Health
Issues Brief

February 2005

Challenges aplenty for health partners to tackle

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Reprint from *Orlando Sentinel*, January 1, 2005

Central Florida's complex health care challenges stem from a historic lack of a coherent public policy at both the state and national level.

Far too many of our citizens have no health insurance. Far too many of our citizens have no primary care physician. Hospital emergency rooms have become the vehicles for both primary and specialty care. Medicare and Medicaid do not cover hospitals' basic costs of providing care, and employers and the insured are footing the bill.

The Central Florida district ranks at the bottom of state funding for mental health. Residents with mental health issues go through hospital emergency rooms or to the Orange County Jail – which is the area's largest provider of mental health services.

Disparities in both access and health outcomes for minority populations continue to be unacceptable. People with chronic conditions over-utilize high cost resources because there are limited alternatives available. Others don't take personal responsibility for preventable problems such as obesity and smoking. And consumers don't have access to meaningful information on health care quality.

Local partnerships like Orange County's Primary Care Access Network (PCAN) and the Osceola Health Issues Task Force (HITF) have made great strides in their communities, and have received millions of dollars in federal grants. The new Seminole County Health Planning Partnership will surely do the same.

But solutions to the larger public policy issues will require concerted efforts by these and other political, community, and health care leaders. I suggest that Central Florida health partners work together to attain these goals in 2005:

1. Obtain funding for a federal Community Health Center in Poinciana, whose application has been approved several times but not funded. Osceola County has no "CHCs" and Poinciana has the need: a large Hispanic community, a high uninsured rate, and few basic primary care services.
2. Expand the PCAN model of using local health dollars to leverage federal ones.
3. Expand and/or develop voluntary specialist panels to provide care to those who do not qualify for Medicaid and who are eligible for charity care. This would lessen the use of Emergency Rooms as referral centers.
4. Educate the public on the appropriate use of Emergency Rooms.
5. Obtain equity funding for mental health services for our area.
6. Develop a meaningful plan for mental health services that will allow true integration of care and coordinated case management.
7. Expand the efforts of the Central Florida Partnership on Health Disparities to include focused interventions for minority groups.
8. Urge people to take more responsibility for their own health and well being, and fully implement the "Central Florida on the Move" obesity prevention project that launches in January in four counties.
9. Bring together our local coalitions, business leaders to educate policy makers on the impact of fragmented state and federal policy decisions. For instance, Medicare and Medicaid must pay fairly. Their failure to do so exacerbates the cost pressures on employers and adds to the uninsured problem.

We must find reasonable and coherent solutions to these challenges. We're running out of time.