

Cook County launches new program for the uninsured



Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle talks about a proposal to get uninsured people treated before they need an emergency room. | Stefano Esposito/Sun-Times

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Cook County officials on Wednesday launched a pilot program aimed at steering uninsured patients away from the emergency room and into doctors' offices.

The Cook County health care system spends about \$450 million a year treating people for everything from advanced cancers to emergency amputations stemming from untreated diabetes, costly procedures that might be avoidable with routine — and relatively inexpensive — visits to the doctor.

“We see the impact when a person is sent to an emergency room with a note from another doctor, like we did a few weeks ago, saying, ‘Throat cancer. Please treat,’” said Dr. Jay Shannon, CEO of Cook County Health and Hospitals System.

Shannon — along with Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and several other board members — announced plans for a new program Wednesday that they hope will encourage the county’s uninsured to get regular primary care and avoid costly trips to the ER. The County Board on Wednesday approved the Coordinated Health Program, which will initially target 40,000 patients already enrolled in the county’s CareLink program for low-income residents.

Six years after the passage of the Affordable Care Act, some 900,000 Illinois residents still do not have health insurance, and the vast majority live in Cook County, Health and Hospitals spokeswoman Alex Normington said. While Medicare and Medicaid programs cover those below or near the federal poverty line of \$24,000 income per year, the working poor still struggle to afford insurance premiums, Normington said.

Cook County already offers care at steep discounts to the uninsured, but most of those patients only enroll after a trip to the ER, officials said. The pilot program, which would come with a membership card and handbook, aims to start treatment much earlier and direct patients to family doctors and regular checkups.

“It’s only going to work if people in the neighborhoods and people throughout Cook County are educated about it, are encouraged to go and are followed up with,” Cook County Commissioner Bridget Gainer said.

With that in mind, officials plan outreach efforts during the next few months at churches and a host of community organization sites.

The county is expected to pay for the program through existing funding. Those who qualify for the program would likely have no out-of-pocket costs except for “nominal” co-pays for prescriptions and dental services, officials said.

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