

# Cook County to start program to help uninsured get health care



Dr. Jay Shannon, CEO of the Cook County health system, discusses a program to help uninsured Cook County residents get health care. (Lisa Schencker / Chicago Tribune)

**[Lisa Schencker](#)** **Contact Reporter** Chicago Tribune

9.15.16

The Cook County Board approved an ordinance Wednesday to start a program to help those without health insurance get regular care so they don't wind up in the emergency room.

The program will allow uninsured Cook County residents earning up to twice the federal poverty level — in other words, \$48,600 a year for a family of four — to get primary care physicians within the Cook County Health and Hospitals System who could also refer them to specialists within the system. The program is expected to help nearly 40,000 people in 2017.

Patients will have access to the system's two acute care hospitals, Stroger Hospital and Provident Hospital, and more than a dozen clinics where they will be able to present a special membership card to receive services.



Communing with Cook County Hospital's ghosts of the past

Program participants will get care at no cost, except for copays that wouldn't likely exceed a few dollars for dental services and prescription drugs. Only those who are not eligible for [Medicaid](#) will qualify.

About 900,000 Illinoisans lacked health insurance last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, despite the [Affordable Care Act](#)'s mandate that all Americans have coverage or pay a fine. Many of Illinois' uninsured are young adults, immigrants living here illegally and lawful immigrants who don't yet qualify for Medicaid, said Kathy Waligora, director of the health reform initiative of EverThrive Illinois, a maternal and child health advocacy organization.

The majority of Illinois residents without health insurance live in Cook County, said board President [Toni Preckwinkle](#). She said 1 out of every 3 patients in the Cook County health system now lack insurance.

### **Cook County seeks OK for new medical office building next to Stroger**

The system spent \$400 million last year on uncompensated care.

Before the board meeting, Preckwinkle said the new program will allow "uninsured people to see a doctor that they know and trust so that they can stay well, keep medical conditions in check and rely on the hospital only for a serious situation."

Dr. Jay Shannon, CEO of the county health system, said the program could eventually save the system money, though he didn't have specific numbers. Cook County plans to spend an additional \$2 million for the program's initial operational costs next year, beyond what it's already spending to care for uninsured patients.

Shannon said it makes sense from a financial and moral perspective to help uninsured Cook County residents, including immigrants living in the U.S. illegally, get the regular care they need.

"It's expensive, and it's wrong and it's unhealthy," Shannon said of only treating uninsured people when they show up at the emergency room.

### **Government survey shows health insurance gains slowing**

Jose Manuel, a patient in the system and advocate for the new program, said he might have avoided a leg amputation had he gotten care for his diabetes earlier. He said he was diagnosed with diabetes in 2003 but couldn't afford regular health care. His leg was amputated in 2006.

"My untreated diabetes completely changed my life," Manuel said in Spanish through a translator. Manuel is also a member of the Healthy Communities Cook County Coalition, which worked with Preckwinkle and Commissioners [Bridget Gainer](#), [Jesus "Chuy" Garcia](#) and [Robert Steele](#) to help create the program.

The commissioners are hoping members of that coalition will help get the word out about the new program.

Eventually, they hope Cook County residents without insurance will call the system's financial assistance line to sign up before they face medical emergencies, Shannon said.

For 2017, the program's members will be limited to those already enrolled in the system's current financial assistance program CareLink, which offers varying discounts on medical care to those who are uninsured, based on a patient's income. That program serves patients with incomes of up to 600 percent of the poverty level. CareLink members who make 200 percent of the poverty level or less will be moved to the new program. CareLink will continue to serve those who make between 200 percent and 600 percent of the poverty level.

*[lschencker@chicagotribune.com](mailto:lschencker@chicagotribune.com)*

*[Twitter @lschencker](#)*

Copyright © 2016, [Chicago Tribune](#)

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-cook-county-health-uninsured-0915-biz-20160914-story.html>