

Update on Health Care Issues in La Plata County

Back in 2009, the local Citizens Health Advisory Council (CHAC) was among those instrumental in applying for and receiving a grant from the Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) to hire Julie Thompson to analyze health care needs in La Plata County and to develop recommendations to meet those needs. The main focus was to be on people without access to reliable, quality health care – particularly those with no or inadequate insurance. In 2010, Julie made eight recommendations. Her recommendations can be found on the CHAC website <http://www.chaclaplata.org/>.

The first of these recommendations was to establish a **Regional Health Care Alliance** (based on the one operating successfully in Weld County CO). Such an alliance was formed and members included the leaders of both hospitals, the Health Department, the local Health & Human Services office, Axis Health System (formerly SW Colorado Mental Health) and others representing local providers. CHAC also sent a representative. Initially, the group met monthly and found the communication and collaboration profitable. Unfortunately, no actual project has yet been directly addressed by this group. They continue to meet quarterly. One of the positive outcomes has been that the Community Needs Assessment reports required by the Affordable Care Act of 2010 are being jointly done by several members, resulting in significant savings of time and money. The first community meeting to collect input for these assessments was held recently and was attended by people from across the community.

Another recommendation was to develop a **single source eligibility process**, where individuals/families need apply one time for eligibility in various programs (including Medicaid), based on a sliding scale fee. This Community Access and Referral Enrollment System (CARES) has been extremely successful.

A **Worksite Wellness Tool Kit** for large or small businesses has been introduced locally. According to the tool kit information, "Worksite wellness is an organized program in the worksite that is intended to assist employees and their family members (and/or retirees) in making voluntary behavior changes which reduce their health and injury risks, improve their health consumer skills and enhance their individual productivity and well being."

An important recommendation was to develop a **Health Information Exchange (HIE)**, i.e., communication between electronic medical records (EMR) systems in the area. This project has been slowed down due to Mercy's new position as part of Centura (which uses a system common to the front range while the western slope mostly uses a system developed in Grand Junction), but progress is being made, and more local medical offices are converting to EMR. For more information on all these initiatives, see the CHAC website <http://www.chaclaplata.org/>.

One big disappointment was that Axis Health System's application for a Federally Qualified Health Clinic (FQHC) was denied. The situation was positive in that Axis made it to the final list, but the number of such applications was drastically cut due to (what

else?) budget constraints. Valley Wide (remember them?) was a FQHC, which allowed them to treat more uninsured and Medicare patients. Axis may reapply, but the cost is not insignificant. Fortunately, Mercy's Health Services Clinic continues to fill some of this gap, but a long-term solution is needed.

On January 25, representatives from the Center for Improving Value in Health Care (CIVHC) came to Durango as part of a tour of SW Colorado and spoke about their ongoing efforts, one of the most important being to develop a database from insurance claims filed across the state in order to determine what problems are the most critical in which areas. For a more detailed report, click [here](#).

What is most encouraging about the local situation is the increasing amount of communication and cooperation among all sections of the health care community, far more than back in the days when we were trying to establish a Health Services District. Attendees at monthly CHAC meetings come from all across the county and from many different organizations so we are all much more aware of what is being done, where more effort needs to be applied, and so on. We are still far from where we'd like to be, but the train is moving in the right direction.

-Jill Patton