

Foundation schedules series on health care

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Senator visits YouthBuild sites

The Lake County Community Foundation hosted U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin's visit to two construction sites in North Chicago last week for a demonstration of the impact of public-private partnerships on providing job skills and work for underprivileged youth.

Houses being built by YouthBuild Lake County will equip 40 students with job and life skills. Public and private grants, including two from the foundation totaling close to \$25,000, fund YouthBuild's work.

Sylvia M. Zaldivar-Sykes, executive director of the foundation, said Durbin asked a lot of questions.

"He loved it," she said.

To learn more, go to www.lakecountycf.org

About 150,000 people in Lake County either have no health insurance or not enough, and the number grows every day. Help may be on the horizon.

The Lake County Community Foundation is funding a series of planning meetings, beginning Sept. 9, to study how primary care to the uninsured might be provided.

"We are still throwing the ingredients into the soup pot," said Sylvia Zaldivar-Sykes, foundation executive director.

Several years ago, Zaldivar-Sykes attended a task force on health care spearheaded by state Sen. Susan Garrett, D-Lake Forest, as a member of the Chicago Community Trust. The group reconvened in March after changes in leadership in Lake County hospitals and the Lake County Health Department.

"The time is right to explore whether we can bring an access program, similar to DuPage (county) or Orange County, Calif.," Zaldivar-Sykes said. "Twenty-five percent of our population is uninsured or underinsured. That's well beyond the national average. We have only one free clinic and an extremely robust health department -- but they see maybe 48,000 people a year."

The crux of an access program, Zaldivar-Sykes said, is to link people to a primary care physician, then help them negotiate prescription drug prices.

Access DuPage is a collaborative effort that provides access to low-cost medical services for county residents who lack health insurance for economic reasons. Founded in 2001, the program has cared for 11,500 residents.

The Lake County task force includes hospitals; the Lake County Health Department; HealthReach clinic; and Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science in North Chicago.

Zaldivar-Sykes said an access program would save hospitals money.

"When individuals show up at the ER, they would show their access card, and they would be counted right away as charity care vs. being put through a process assuming they will pay some or all of their care."

An access program would demand collaboration among providers and investment by primary care physicians.

"In our county, there's a for-profit hospital located in the heart of need, and not-for-profits are seeing increases and increases and increases into their ERs because there are more people in need than there are places to go," Zaldivar-Sykes said.

The task force, which will outline a set of recommendations by December, will be led by Dick Endress, president of Access DuPage.

"Hospitals and other private funders will have to invest, to make it a reality," Zaldivar-Sykes said.