

# PERSPECTIVE

## Clinics vital in an ailing economy

**BARBARA MANNINO**

As we begin 2009 with cautious optimism, I feel compelled to share with you how the global economic situation is affecting the health of San Diego residents and what we as a community must do to mitigate these effects.

The need for affordable health care is increasing dramatically. We see this every day in our clinics. Already this fiscal year, Vista Community Clinic has seen an increase in patient visits larger than what we had expected. Our waiting rooms are filled with people who are coming to us for the first time. Some have lost their jobs. Some have had to make decisions about which medication they can afford to take or whether they can afford the bus ride to the clinic. Most never thought they would ever need a community clinic.

There are more than 47 million people without health insurance in the United States. People can be uninsured for a variety of reasons. Some are unemployed, but about 80 percent of the country's uninsured are full- or part-time workers in small businesses.

People also fall in and out

of health insurance after transitions such as divorce, exiting the military services or graduating from school. All of us at one point or another will be at risk for losing health insurance.

When a community has members without health insurance, it affects us all. For example, we know that a sick child who goes without treatment today will quickly become a classroom, a school, a community full of sick children.

We know that an adult who cannot afford his diabetes medication might soon find himself in a crowded emergency room.

Community clinics play a valuable role in keeping people healthy at all stages of life. About 67 percent of our 52,000 patients come to us without any form of insurance. Almost half of our patients are children.

Our promise to the community is that Vista Community Clinic will never turn away a sick child. With more children coming through the doors and less money with which to work, that commitment is becoming harder and harder to fulfill.

The financial situation facing the state of California affects the ability of community clinics to provide care. The state is currently operating

out of a deficit position and, as of this writing, we do not know whether, come spring, we will continue to be reimbursed for the services we provide or begin receiving IOUs. Regardless of what happens with the state budget, the community will need medical care.

This economic crisis has long-term health consequences for our community. If we are to mitigate those consequences, the community must participate. Encourage friends and family to seek medical attention when necessary. Do not let your loved ones who are sick wait until the need is so great they have to visit the emergency room.

As soon as you lose health insurance or anticipate that you will, do your research to find out what options are available to you. Will you or your children qualify for public insurance? Where is your nearest community clinic? If you don't know the answers to these questions, come to us.

I know we can weather this economic downturn. My question is, will we come through it with our greatest wealth — our health? It is up to you to decide.

**Barbara Mannino** is the chief executive officer of the Vista Community Clinic.

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