

NEWS

Wisconsin Hospitals' Reach Extends Beyond Campus Boundaries *Hospitals support more than 70 free clinics, outreach programs reach millions*

MADISON (October 9, 2007) ---- Where do you go when you need medical attention and you don't have insurance? Many hospitals in Wisconsin are establishing free clinics in their communities to treat patients who do not have a "medical home." Often in partnership with other hospitals, public health agencies and medical clinics, hospitals support or operate more than 70 free clinics in Wisconsin, serving patients with chronic illness, dental, or primary health care concerns.

Charles Shabino, MD, senior medical advisor with the Wisconsin Hospital Association, said free clinics provide a barrier-free access point to health care services for people who do not have a primary care physician, or are unable to pay for the care they are sometimes afraid they will need.

"Free clinics fulfill a vital role in many of our communities. A visit to a free clinic can provide not only care for an immediate health issue, but it also helps establish a relationship with a group of medical professionals who can connect the patient to a physician that can provide follow-up care," Shabino said.

Hospitals Create "Safety Nets"

Without warning, Mary Horne's life was turned upside down. A stroke paralyzed her right side, affecting her ability to write, drive and even hold a phone. As a retired teacher who relocated to Wisconsin, her insurance wouldn't cover the treatments, which totaled thousands of dollars. She asked for help from St. Mary's Hospital in Madison and found that she qualified for discounts, charity care, and some much-needed emotional support.

Mary Horne was one of the thousands of patients who needed help with a medical bill and found that they qualified for charity care in Wisconsin last year. In 2006, Wisconsin hospitals provided \$202 million in charity care to an average of 685 people every day of the year. Larry Wagner in Eau Claire was among them.

Larry's wife Agnes was worried about Larry's health as they rushed to Luther Midelfort Hospital in Eau Claire following his heart attack, but she also worried how they were going to pay his bill.

"I told the staff right away that we didn't have insurance, but they said, 'Don't worry about that right now. We'll talk about that when Larry is stable.' There was never any pressure," she says. The couple later learned that they qualified for the hospital's charity care program.

Linda Ward, patient financial specialist at Sauk Prairie Memorial Hospital in Prairie du Sac, connects patients with the resources they need in her community. "Community Care, or charity care, represents the hospital's commitment to improving the health of our community," according to Ward. "One of the most tangible ways we can do this is to recognize people who may be struggling to pay medical bills. We can help determine if a patient can get financial help from local, state and federal health care programs, and we can help them with the application process," she added.

Wisconsin Hospital Association President Steve Brenton said community service and the desire to improve the health status of the entire community is fundamental to the mission of every Wisconsin hospital.

“Whether it is providing financial assistance to patients with limited resources through charity care programs, or improving access to essential or primary health care services by sponsoring free clinics or health screenings, Wisconsin hospitals provide a ‘safety net’ of care in the communities they serve,” Brenton said. “Without that care in place, state and local government would have a much greater burden in trying to deliver these essential services to a vulnerable population,” he added.

Learn How Hospitals Help Their Communities

WHA surveyed its 132 member hospitals and asked them to describe and quantify the programs, services, and activities that they provide at or below cost, solely because those programs fulfill a health need in the community. Wisconsin is the first state in the nation to voluntarily report the quality, safety, and price of care that they provide. Consumers can learn more about the valuable educational classes, free clinics and bill assistance programs, as well as other services hospitals offer at www.wiServePoint.org.

Fast Facts From the WHA 2007 Hospital Community Benefits Report

- Wisconsin hospitals reported spending \$134 million on medical education. Hospitals donated space for clinical training, provided instructors to teach classes, and trained new physicians and nurses on site with experienced medical staff.
- Nearly 70,000 people in Wisconsin participated in a hospital-sponsored support group.
- Hospitals reached more than five million people through their community education and outreach efforts.
- The 33 hospitals that own nursing homes lost nearly \$17 million on those operations in 2006. In many of these communities, if the hospital did not operate a nursing home, those residents would be forced to leave their community to receive this specialized care.

Online Resources for Consumers

www.wiCheckPoint.org -- Features information related to the quality and safety of care provided in Wisconsin hospitals

www.wiPricePoint.org -- Provides information related to inpatient and outpatient hospital charges, as well as utilization and payer mix data

www.wiServePoint.org -- Programs and services related to Wisconsin hospitals service to their communities. Includes patient stories and program descriptions.

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Note to news media: The patients featured in this news release and many more patient stories are posted at www.wiServePoint.org. Call Mary Kay Grasmick at WHA or contact your local hospital's communications department for more information.