

Hearing Voices of Durham's Uninsured

Originally printed in the Durham Herald Sun on March 13, 2008.

A remarkable process is underway to help hundreds and even thousands of people without health insurance in Durham. At the Durham Health Summit in 2002, access to healthcare emerged as an important issue. In the Spring of 2003, a task force formed out of this summit, facilitated by Durham Health Partners and consisting of local physicians and healthcare administrators, and began working on a possible solution.

In August 2006, four local community groups, including the Access to Care Committee of the Partnership for Healthy Durham, Durham CAN (Congregations, Association and Neighborhoods), Durham Health Partners, and the Latino Community Credit Union met with the leadership of Duke University Health System to discuss access to health services in Durham. In December 2006 – community groups *and* local institutions gathered to discuss the problems that people with no health insurance, who also have limited incomes, face in the City of Medicine. Meeting participants agreed that access to affordable health coverage is a national and statewide problem, and yet, “all healthcare is local.” Participants agreed that Durham cannot afford to wait for slow bureaucratic processes to create real change for our neighbors in need. In fact, we might find local solutions that help drive health policy changes at higher levels.

One of the results of this process is the creation of a new nonprofit organization, Project Access of Durham County (PADC). If all goes as planned, PADC will begin enrolling patients in July. This program will provide specialty care to uninsured Durham residents with incomes under 200% of the federal poverty level (\$42,400 for a family of four). Many of these individuals have access to primary care through Lincoln Community Health Center or other “safety-net” healthcare providers; however, obtaining specialty care is a challenge. For example, if someone needs a heart specialist and an echocardiogram or stress test (tests for how well the heart is performing), primary care providers do not provide these services.

Project Access is a system of care that links volunteer medical specialists, such as a cardiologist, with uninsured patients who need specialized care, at little or no charge to the patient. The related tests, labs, medications and even hospitalizations will be covered at minimal or no charge. PADC will provide care management, disease management, transportation, and interpreter services if needed. PADC will begin by helping eligible patients at Lincoln, which serves approximately two-thirds of the uninsured in Durham County. PADC will evaluate plans to expand to accept referrals from other clinics and practices.

PADC has emerged out of this extraordinary process of commitment from:

- The Partnership for a Healthy Durham
- Durham CAN
- NC Institute of Medicine
- Durham County Government
- Duke University Health System
- Lincoln Community Health Center

- NC Specialty Hospital
- The Durham Orange Medical Society
- Prima Health
- The Durham Academy of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy
- Community physicians of Durham County

Each of these groups has dedicated a significant amount of time, energy, and resources to making Project Access happen in Durham County. They realized that they needed to hear from the community in order for the new program to be responsive to them. These groups worked together to host the 2007 Durham Health Summit: “Listening to the Voices of Durham’s Uninsured”, which was a very informative meeting, with over 200 people attending. Attendees provided input to local healthcare initiatives for the uninsured through polls, small discussion groups, and anonymous surveys. Some of the information shared at the Summit:

- 13% of attendees reported being without insurance.
- The vast majority of attendees stated that they would be willing to pay \$50 – 100 for a basic health plan if they were uninsured.
- The more reported income, the higher the amount folks were willing to pay for medical coverage.
- 32% felt that insurance companies and 27% felt that local government should help with the cost of a low-cost health plan for the uninsured.
- All small groups felt that there would be a need for a low-cost general health plan even once Project Access is operating.
- 63% of groups reported that a low-cost health plan would be needed primarily for emergency medical need or to avoid medical debt while only 18% of folks noted that having a primary care home was the main reason to have a low-cost health plan.
- 89% of small groups noted that they would be willing to pay \$100 or more in local taxes or fees to help create a low-cost community health plan for uninsured Durham residents.
- Two-thirds of the participants thought Project Access should also be available for non-Lincoln patients.

The collaborating organizations are using this information as a guide to organize Project Access and other potential programs for individuals without health insurance in Durham. PADC will only be a partial solution, but it will provide important help to a significant number of those in greatest need.

If PADC is successful, it will be due largely to the enthusiasm and participation from physicians, hospitals, and the uninsured individuals who need specialist services. PADC organizers need to continue to involve all stakeholders in decision-making and ensure that shared responsibility is the response to our local healthcare challenges. Then, “all healthcare is local” doesn’t sound so bad after all.

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- ◆ The North Carolina Association for Healthcare Access (NCAHA), created in 2007, is a non-profit organization committed to supporting the networks of physicians, hospitals and other healthcare providers to expand access to healthcare for the low-income medically uninsured of North Carolina. www.ncahaccess.org, (828) 274-9337.
- ◆ The NC Institute of Medicine has a Task Force on Covering the Uninsured, which is part of a larger planning effort to examine options to expand health insurance coverage to the uninsured. Their 2006 report on “Expanding Health Insurance Coverage to More North Carolinians” is available at their website, www.nciom.org. 401-6599.

The Partnership for a Healthy Durham is the Healthy Carolinians planning team for Durham and serves as the Health Committee for the City and County’s Results-Based Accountability initiative. The Access to Care Committee is responsible for this series of articles. For more information on the Partnership, see www.healthydurham.org or call 560-7833.