

# Community Connections

January 2009

## Access to High Quality Primary Health Care Services

*Erie County, Pennsylvania*



The Erie  
Community  
Foundation

*Helping today... Shaping tomorrow.*

**Community Connections is a series of publications  
designed to build and share knowledge on public issues in Erie County, Pennsylvania.**

To further its mission to improve the quality of life in our region by evaluating and addressing community issues, The Erie Community Foundation initiated the “**Access to Care**” project in 2006. The goal of the project is to improve access to primary health services for the underserved in Erie County. For the purpose of this initiative, primary care consists of family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics, and general dentistry. Underserved includes anyone who is not receiving primary care services because of barriers such as cost, insurance, transportation and/or health literacy.

Since its beginning, the **Access to Care Project** has worked closely with the PartnerSHIP for a Healthy Community, John Snow, Inc., the Erie County Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, and others to formulate strategies to improve health care access. One of our most visible accomplishments was facilitating the planning and grantwriting that leveraged \$340,000 to open a new **Community Health Net** general dentistry site at

the Martin Luther King Center on June 1, 2008. Increased collaboration is also laying the groundwork for improving access to care in Erie County.



**Working together, many partners brought enhanced dentistry services to the Martin Luther King Center.**

# Health Care in Our Community

## Background

Access to care is defined by the Institute of Medicine as “the timely use of personal health services to achieve the best possible health outcome”.<sup>1</sup> Public opinion research conducted by the Herndon Alliance—a nationwide non-partisan coalition of more than 100 minority, faith, labor, advocacy, business, and health care provider organizations—cites that the vast majority of Americans favor the concept of providing quality affordable health care to all. It’s not right that hard-working American families are struggling to afford health care. People shouldn’t have to choose between filling a prescription or filling up at the gas station. Access to quality affordable health care in the United States should be available to all, not a privilege for those who can afford it.

The government provides insurance plans for those with low incomes, including Medical Assistance, CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Plan) and Adult Basic (lower cost insurance for those not eligible for Medical Assistance). What caused so many in our county to go without needed coverage? Are the barriers to the programs so great they couldn’t use them to care for their own and their family’s health?

### **The prevailing barriers to adequate health care identified through the study were:**

- **lack of health insurance**
- **cost**
- **issues related to cultural/linguistic competence of staff**
- **health literacy**
- **transportation**

For people who are uninsured or underinsured, identifying and accessing health care can be difficult. There is a clear and consistent relationship between a lack of health insurance and reduced access to health services,<sup>5</sup> as well as inferior health outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Insurance status and ability to pay for services are the most important predictors of the quality of health care across various populations.<sup>7</sup> The uninsured receive less preventive care, are diagnosed at more advanced stages of disease, and receive lower amounts of care such as surgical procedures and medications.<sup>8</sup> Uninsured children are also at greater risk for poor health outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, the number of working-age adults who have major chronic conditions grew between 1997 and 2006, and those without health coverage in this group experienced substantial erosion in access to health care. More of both privately and publicly insured with chronic conditions went without health care because of its cost, despite being just as likely as others to have a usual source of care.<sup>10</sup>

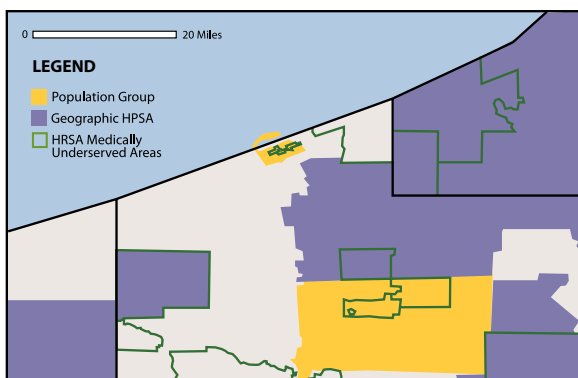
## Erie’s Safety Net

Erie County’s health care safety net system includes government sponsored programs such as Community Health Net, which is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), Corry Medical Group, a Rural Health Clinic (RHC), MHEDS (Multicultural Health Evaluation Delivery System), the Saint Paul’s Neighborhood Free Clinic and hospital-based clinics.

Results from a 2008 study conducted in Erie county<sup>2</sup> reported that more than 50,000 eligible people in the region did not choose to sign up for this benefit.<sup>3</sup> During the same time period almost 7,000 children were eligible for the Children’s Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), but only about half enrolled.<sup>4</sup>

Private physicians and other health practitioners also provide services for the uninsured and underinsured. Additionally, over 50 million dollars in uncompensated care was provided in Erie County last year alone by major hospitals.

In spite of these resources, much of Erie County is classified as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) or Medically Underserved Area (MUA). To qualify to be an HPSA or MUA, a region or group must apply to the Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). HRSA then determines if the applying region has enough providers for the number of residents and types of illness or public health problems present. See Figure 1 for more detail about what parts of Erie County have been identified as a HPSA or MUA.



**Figure 1. Health Professional Shortage and Medically Underserved Areas**

## *Snapshot of Erie County Characteristics that Impact Health*

Erie has just fewer than 280,000 residents in the county. However, almost 14 percent of adults are living below poverty—a slightly higher percentage than is seen in the state as a whole. The percent of adults without health insurance is 11 percent—slightly lower than the state rate of uninsured (13 percent). Seven percent of Erie County adults report having no personal health care provider, whereas the state rate is 10 percent. Erie County mirrors the state when it comes to how many adults reported they needed to see a doctor but could not because of cost. And finally, 13 percent of Erie County adults report their general health as fair or poor—slightly better than the state rate of 14 percent. While Erie seems to be keeping pace with the state on most of these measures, it is a mistake to think there are no areas where we can make strides to improve the access to high quality health care in our community, or that meeting state expectations is sufficient.

	<b>Erie County</b>	<b>PA</b>
County population (2007)	279,092	12,432,792
Percent living below poverty (2004)	13.7%	11.2%
Percent of adults 18-64 without health insurance (2004-2006)	11%	13%
Percent of adults with no personal health care provider (2004-2006)	7%	10%
Percent of adults reporting they needed to see a doctor but could not because of cost (2004-2006)	10%	10%
Percent of adults reporting fair or poor general health (2004-2006)	13%	14%

# Challenges of Inadequate Access to Care

## Spotlight 1 – Dental Care

Erie County residents face many barriers in terms of receiving adequate access to care. Only half of those surveyed through the Access to Care study indicated that they had a dental visit within the past year. Findings suggest that in Erie County, improved access to general dentistry and oral surgery services is critically needed. This was determined by using a survey tool developed by the federal government to designate areas of medical under service or health professional need. As a part of the Access to Care project, the Area Health Education Center submitted the survey results along with a request for federal designation to the PA Department of Health. Subsequently, the entire county has been designated as a Dental Health Professional Shortage Area by the Federal Government. This designation provides an incentive for dental health professionals to practice in the county. By doing so, they can apply for the school loan forgiveness or scholarship programs offered by the PA Department of Health or the National Health Service Corps. The assessment indicated a need for 11.5 dentists just to fulfill the needs of our Medical Assistance and uninsured population!

*“I am a new patient of Booker T. Washington Center Dental Office. This office has a very warm and friendly atmosphere. Please express my appreciation to everyone who worked with me during my recent appointments. Dr. Dhariwal, Marina Tishenko, RDN, and Valentina Belousova, DA, did a remarkably good service. They are competent and professional. For all my questions, I received answers which I was satisfied. Thank you for thoughtful and excellent care that they gave me. May God bless your work.” — new patient to the Booker T. Washington Dental Office*

## Spotlight 2- Primary Care

Slightly less than half of the county’s total population sought primary care services at Community Health Net, the hospitals’ clinics, or their emergency rooms. Fifty-six percent of the population who lives below 200 percent of the federal poverty level is served by Community Health Net and the Hospital providers. Of the people being served, 35 percent go to the emergency room for their primary care needs. However, the hospitals usually divert these patients to their “fast track” areas that are set up in or near the Emergency Department. As a result, there were only about 4,000 primary care visits in the Emergency Room—possibly at hours when doctor’s offices are not open. This is important information because it tells us that, in general, we must do a better job to inform everyone of primary care services available in settings other than the Emergency Room, and encourage them to use the safety net to decrease this additional burden on our Emergency Care system.

# Options to Receive Health Care Coverage for Those Without Private Insurance

The government provides insurance plans for those with low incomes, including Medical Assistance, CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Plan) and Adult Basic (lower cost insurance for those not eligible for Medical Assistance).

**Medical Assistance** is the joint state/federal Medical Assistance program (also known as Medicaid) that provides payment for health care services on behalf of eligible low-income individuals with limited income and high medical expenses, and covers close

to 1.9 million Pennsylvania residents. For more information, or to determine eligibility, contact the Erie County Assistance Office at 1-800-635-1014.

**CHIP** is the Children's Health Insurance Program that provides health insurance to all uninsured children and teens who are not eligible for or enrolled in Medical Assistance. With the Cover All Kids initiative, CHIP was expanded to include all uninsured children and teens in the commonwealth who are not eligible for Medical Assistance at a sliding scale. Now all children in Pennsylvania have access to affordable, comprehensive health care coverage. For more information, call 1-800-986-KIDS, or visit: [www.chipcoverspakids.com](http://www.chipcoverspakids.com).

**Adult Basic** was designed to provide health insurance for adults meeting certain eligibility requirements and who do not have health care coverage. It is administered by the Pennsylvania Insurance Department. Through contract with four insurance companies, Adult Basic offers benefits including preventative care, physician services, diagnosis and treatment of illness or injury, in-patient hospitalization, out-patient hospital services, emergency accident and medical care. For more information, please contact the Erie County office of Health and Safety at (814) 451-6700.

## *ECF Grants and Opportunities for Involvement*

In addition to the Access to Care project, ECF has provided significant funding to the PartnerSHIP for a Healthy Community. The PartnerSHIP is the State Health Improvement Plan partner, an affiliate agency with the Pennsylvania Department of Health. The Erie SHIP was initially one of the first seven organizations receiving this designation by the state, originally called the Health Care Cost Summit. Incorporation activities in August 2006 resulted in a name change and refocus of mission. In January 2008, the SHIP went from an all volunteer run organization to hiring a full-time executive director, fiscal and administrative staff. The mission of the SHIP is "to promote community health and development by connecting people, ideas, and resources" with the emphasis to "eliminate barriers to wellness for the residents of Erie County".

The SHIP created a comprehensive strategic plan, which focuses its work through two task forces: **1)** Access to Care, and **2)** Disparity Health Education Health Literacy. The plan identifies 26 health improvement projects to address in the next five years. The SHIP has successfully "bridged the gap" between the ecumenical community and the health care delivery system and assisted with the September 2008 Health, Wealth and Wellness Week with over 200 participants. Recently they implemented the "Wear A Scrub. Get A Career" program targeting children in the minority community

**"He who has health, has hope. And he who has hope, has everything."**

*—Arabian Proverb*

to introduce them to medical careers. The project will serve 270 children and ready them for medical career camps in the summer. Project activities will cover six events through 12 minority churches. For more information on the SHIP, visit their Web site [www.erieship.org](http://www.erieship.org).

## Summary

Access to quality, appropriate care is essential to the health of a community. Poor health outcomes cross into the education and employment sectors and negatively impact the overall vitality of an area. The time to take action and improve access to quality affordable care for Erie County residents is now. Without appropriate access to needed health care, chronic disease management is compromised, costs rise as care is sought in later stages of treatment, and ultimately, people suffer unnecessarily.

The Erie Community Foundation is committed to providing ongoing support to community institutions and organizations pursuing this important work. In 2009, we will convene a Community Access Panel (CAP) to further inform, guide, and evaluate our work. The CAP will be made up of community experts and trustees of ECF.

Here are some next steps to improve access to care in Erie County:

1. Continue to research and identify best practices addressing access to care needs of the community.
2. Address cost and quality issues related to making progress in access to care for the community.
3. Increase the opportunity for consumers to learn about primary care and related services available to them.
4. Develop and implement a medical home model throughout Erie County.
5. Leverage federal and state funding to support expansion of primary medical and dental services as is needed by the underserved residents of Erie County.

We invite you to get involved in these efforts to strengthen the work.

Please contact The Erie Community Foundation with your thoughts and ideas.

## ENDNOTES

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- 14 IBID
- 15 IBID
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