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Health reform grants aimed at doubling Idaho's low-cost care

Health care access for the poor will increase significantly in Idaho if community health centers are successful in competing for funding under the Affordable Care Act.

One Treasure Valley community that would see change is Middleton, where [Terry Reilly Health Services](#) will create a new clinic if it wins a grant from the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#).

Most of the state's 13 community health centers have applied for funding under the HHS program, which is aimed at creating "new access points" for low-cost primary and preventative health services. The competitive grants from HHS are intended to create new health clinics, not expand exist clinics.

Community health centers are open to all, regardless of ability to pay. They provide primary and preventive medical care, dental services, and mental health care for a discounted fee to people who qualify based on income. They receive part of their revenue from federal grants.

Under the health bill passed by Congress last year, the number of people nationwide served by community health centers will likely double over the next five years.

"[Health reform] has been a good thing for clinics like Terry Reilly," said Timothy Brown, executive director of the Nampa-based health center.

Idaho's 13 community health centers care for about 130,000 people in Idaho at 35 sites, according to Denise Chuckovich, executive director of the [Idaho Primary Care Association](#).

As the largest of Idaho's community health centers, the 40-year-old Terry Reilly has an annual budget of about \$18 million and provides low-cost medical services to 30,000 people in the Treasure Valley. Its revenues come from Medicaid payments, cash fees from patients, and fundraising. It also gets millions of dollars in other donations and in in-kind support, such as medication.

For its Middleton clinic, Terry Reilly applied for ongoing funding of \$650,000 annually to lease 3,000 square feet of space. The new clinic would house a full-time dentist and a full-time midlevel medical practitioner such as a nurse practitioner or physician assistant. A physician would also be assigned to the clinic, but wouldn't be there every day. Funding awards will be announced in August.

Brown said Middleton was chosen because it has a high poverty level and many uninsured residents. HHS, which awards the grants, was looking for projects that would serve migrant farm workers, many of whom live around Middleton.

Health grants 1

“It would be awesome to have them here in Middleton,” said Wendy Howell, city planning and zoning administrator. Howell said many residents can’t afford any form of transportation and have limited access to care in town. Middleton does have a clinic run by [West Valley Medical Center](#) of Caldwell with a physician, a physician assistant, and a nurse practitioner.

“With the unemployment rate and the low income, some of the citizens we have are barely able to make ends meet,” Howell said. “With health care being so expensive, any help they can get is a benefit.”

Brown said expanding into an area fits into the purpose of Terry Reilly, which was created to serve the low-income.

“We’re a mission-driven organization and we feel like it’s in our best interest to bring our services to Middleton. They demonstrated the greatest need,” he said.

If the clinic proves to be needed and sustainable, Terry Reilly might build its own clinic in four or five years, Brown said. The expansion would create 10 new jobs in Middleton.

Terry Reilly won’t open a clinic in Middleton unless it wins the funding. But the community health center expects to double the number of patients it serves in the next five years anyway by expanding in other areas of service. The nonprofit serves patients at six medical clinics, four dental clinics, and eight mental health sites now. It’s renovating a building in Boise where it will expand its services in June.

Community health centers ready for expansion

By Anne Wallace Allen

HHS is prepared to release \$11 billion for community health center expansion over the next four years, said Denise Chuckovich, executive director of the Idaho Primary Care Association.

Increasing access to low-cost care is a priority for President Obama and the policymakers who crafted the health reform bill. Community health centers, also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers, traditionally enjoy bipartisan support. For that reason, Timothy Brown, executive director of Terry Reilly, said it is unlikely any alterations to the new health reform law would affect the work done by the Boise-based clinic for the low-income.

He noted the community health centers saw their largest expansion in history under the administration of the second George Bush.

“We’re something that both Republicans and Democrats support,” Brown said. “We’re one of the things within that bill that needs to be retained.”

Brown said his job is to make sure Terry Reilly stays with its original mission through any expansion.

“There’s going to be a lot of opportunities for growth through new funding,” Brown said. “It’s really important for us to make sure that those opportunities are focused on the most pressing community need and patient need.”