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The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Wednesday June 14, 2017
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Free health clinics make a comeback amid fear of Obamacare demise

WASHINGTON — After eight years of stagnant growth during Obamacare’s coverage expansion, free and charitable health clinics are experiencing a major growth spurt amid Republican efforts to slash health coverage for the poor.

A safety-net health care provider for low-income Americans, the nation’s 1,200-plus free clinics typically are underfunded, understaffed and overwhelmed by an outsized mission that far outstrips their limited resources. Forty-three percent have annual operating budgets under \$100,000.

But as millions of people gained coverage under the Affordable Care Act, the number of clinics didn’t increase for eight years. In fact, the total number declined by 11 nationwide from 2009 to 2017 as more patients with insurance moved into mainstream medical care.

That negative growth rate ended abruptly this year, however. Fifty-two new free and charitable clinics – which receive no federal funding – are set to open in 2017. And 100 more will open next year, said Nicole Lamoureux, CEO of the National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics, based in Alexandria, Va.

The burst of activity reflects both the unmet health care needs of the nation’s 29 million uninsured, but also the hardships posed by rising out-of-pocket costs for people with Medicaid and private coverage.

Many Medicaid enrollees – and some people covered under the ACA – simply can’t afford their co-pays and deductibles and instead seek care at clinics that charge nothing or only a modest fee for treatment, Lamoureux said.

Inability to utilize one’s coverage because of the cost is a frequent Republican complaint about Obamacare. President Donald Trump, Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, White House budget director Mick Mulvaney and House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., all have cited the problem as evidence that Obamacare is crumbling.

But projected coverage losses under health care proposals from congressional Republicans and the Trump administration also are fueling renewed interest in clinics.

The House Republican health care bill would cut Medicaid spending by nearly \$900 billion over the next decade and cause 23 million people to lose coverage over the same period. Senate Republicans are working on their own version behind closed doors, and there is expectation that they’ll pick up many of the same provisions.

“The explanation for why there may be an upsurge in clinics right now, I think, is the perception in our communities that there’s going to be a real need for this service,” said Randy Jordan, CEO of the North Carolina

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Association of Free and Charitable Clinics. “The discourse that’s taking place with health care in our country probably has stimulated some of that sense of need.”

Lamoureux agreed. Shortly after the Republican health bill passed the House of Representatives in early May, Lamoureux said her association received an unusual funding bump: \$100,000 in donations, mostly from contributions of \$40 or less.

Unlike Community Health Centers that are federally funded, free and charitable clinics rely mainly on volunteer medical providers and private philanthropic funding.

by Tony Pugh for McClatchy

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