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Health care dilemma: Funds cut threatens donated services

By Jacob Santini
The Salt Lake Tribune

Sara Chavez faced one of those ultimate dilemmas; she had a cancerous growth on the right side of her abdomen, yet with no insurance and an income already stretched she had no way to pay for treatment.

"I filled out lots of paperwork so I could get a loan or so [the hospital] could help me out,"

Chavez said in Spanish, through an interpreter.

It's a dilemma thousands of Utahns face.

Chavez got help though. She was referred to Salt Lake County's Health Access Project, which in turn assigned her a case manager and got her a physician who performed two surgeries on her last fall. The great majority of the care was free to Chavez.

"If it wasn't for them, I don't know what we would have done," Chavez said.

The 2 1/2-year-old project, however, is at a crossroads and may be forced to begin trimming the number of people it aids.

The three-year, \$2 million federal grant that helped launch the nonprofit organization -- which links the uninsured and underinsured with doctors and hospitals willing to donate services -- expires in September. Local hospitals, the Utah Medical Association and state and county health departments have vowed to fund the project through the end of the year and to support the project in 2005.



Physician Sara Pieper shares a laugh with patient Jacoba Horrocks during an appointment at the Salt Lake Clinic this week as part of the Health Access Project. The project has 500 doctors who donate care to the uninsured. (Steve Griffin/The Salt Lake Tribune)

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But they can't replace the federal grant, which was one-time money the project isn't eligible to reapply for.

Advertisement "Assuming [promised funding is] all in place, that puts us at 50 to 60 percent of our budget for 2005," said Tanya Kahl, the project's director.

Without a new benefactor, the Health Access Project will look much different in 2005.

"We're talking about shrinking a little bit," said Scott Leckman, a medical doctor who sits on the project's Governance Committee. "Ideally, it would be growing."

The project has enough doctors -- more than 500 who have agreed to treat 12 unfunded people annually -- to double its capacity, Leckman said.

To date, the project has had 1,651 clients. That correlates to \$835,519 in donated physician care and \$1.25 million in hospital care. But there are an estimated 215,000 Utahns without insurance, according to the state's Department of Health.

The grant primarily funded case management, which has allowed physicians to concentrate on care.

Case management was an essential piece to getting physicians to participate, Leckman said, because they only have to worry about providing care, not busy work, such as finding a specialist for a patient and approaching hospitals about charity lab work, bed space and operating room use.

The project also wouldn't have succeeded without hospitals donating resources. One of the project's goals is to provide primary care and avoid high-cost emergency room visits.

"Our objective is to help the hospitals out to provide a place for people to go to other than the emergency room," Leckman said.

jsantini@sltrib.com

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