

Health systems put community over competition in helping the uninsured

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"Mission Challenged ... Hospitals Respond" is a recurring series on how hospitals are helping the uninsured in their communities.

Who benefits when two area health systems put the community ahead of competition? So far more than 5,000 low-income residents of Toledo and Lucas County, OH. They are the beneficiaries of a partnership spearheaded by ProMedica Health System and Mercy Health Partners.

Responding to a challenge by Toledo's mayor to address the needs of the uninsured, the partnership three years ago launched Toledo/Lucas County CareNet. The program coordinates care and coverage for residents who don't qualify for government health insurance programs and can't afford private health coverage. CareNet received an AHA NOVA award this year.

CareNet issues membership cards that enable eligible residents to receive free or discounted service. "It's like an insurance card," said Jan Ruma, CareNet's executive director and vice president of the Hospital Council of Northwest Ohio. Members "show their CareNet card and their charges are either written off or reduced."

Participating hospitals provide care at no cost to CareNet members, with a sliding scale fee in place for certain hospital-based physicians and anesthesiologists. Other partners provide transportation to medical appointments, specialty and dental care, psychiatric counseling and vision screening.

ProMedica spokeswoman Holly Bristoll said CareNet "provides its members with a primary care medical home, rather than going to the emergency department or not seeking care at all." CareNet executive director Ruma said the program illustrates how two health systems can "put competition aside and pool their resources to get care to the people who need it most."

Just ask people like Annette Abers, a Toledo resident who had not received regular medical care for 12 years before she enrolled in CareNet. "Now I have a regular doctor and get required medical attention," she said. "I feel very welcomed. CareNet is a completely positive experience."

CareNet today includes all hospitals in Toledo and Lucas County. Its biggest challenge is attracting more physician specialists and expanded its members' access to drug coverage.

Most CareNet enrollees are adults, because Ohio's Medicaid program covers children in families with incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty level. "The government safety net is taking care of children, but it's the adults who are really falling through the cracks and that's where CareNet fits in," Ruma said.