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Community health centers fighting ‘awful’ effect of the sequester

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Funding loss presents ‘double whammy’ with state Medicaid action

CARRBORO, N.C. (Wednesday, Feb. 27) -- If the federal budget sequester is allowed to go into effect, it will have a significant and devastating effect on the ability of community health centers to provide health care, Piedmont Health CEO Brian Toomey said today. Piedmont Health, which operates six health centers in central North Carolina that provide care for the state’s most vulnerable citizens, stands to lose between \$350,000 and \$500,000 annually, Toomey said.

CHARLES DREW COMMUNITY
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“The sequester would have a significant impact on the economy and health care,” he said. “It would not be devastating on Day 1, but one month down the road, if nothing changes, the health-care system will start to see the full effect, and it will be awful. Over time, it will mean more and more people getting primary health care from hospital emergency rooms, which is the most inefficient and expensive way to provide primary care – and many hospitals are already handling as much care for uninsured and underinsured people as they can handle.

MONCURE COMMUNITY HEALTH
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“At the same time, it will mean job freezes and lay-offs for Piedmont Health at a time when the economic recovery is fragile,” Toomey added.

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Piedmont Health officials have been seeking patient and community support for their efforts to stop the sequester and to support Medicaid expansion. More than 800 people have signed letters urging those two goals.

SCOTT CLINIC
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Community Health Centers (CHCs) provide high-quality, accessible medical care to citizens across the nation. CHCs accept all forms of insurance and patients pay on a sliding-scale basis, depending on ability to pay. The centers receive only a small portion of operating funds from government sources. CHCs receive strong bipartisan support and have consistently been rated by federal budget officials as one of the most cost-effective use of taxpayer dollars.

SILER CITY COMMUNITY
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The sequester would present a “double whammy” to North Carolina residents with the State Legislature voting to deny Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act. CHCs play a pivotal role in the implementation of that act. Medicaid expansion would allow Piedmont to increase the number of patients its CHCs treat each year from 40,000 to about 48,000. But even that modest increase

would not fill all unmet needs; the projected need for health-care in the counties Piedmont Health serves is 20,000 additional patients each year, Toomey said.

Statewide, the sequester would result in 14,000 health center patients losing access to care, according to the North Carolina Community Health Center Association. If these individuals turned to emergency rooms just once, the cost would be over \$8.5 million.

Failing to expand Medicaid is a “risky decision” based on an assumption that promised federal funds will not be forthcoming, Toomey said. “If that turns out to be right, it might be a good decision,” he explained. “But if the assumption is wrong, North Carolina citizens will be sending our tax dollars to other states. At least those states would get some benefits from Medicaid expansion, even if the sequester goes through. But we would be seeing no benefits and we would be getting the cuts as well.”

Even a majority of Republican-governed states are assuming that the promised federal funds will come through, Toomey noted.

Hattie King, a patient care coordinator in the Charles Drew Community Health Center in Burlington, said support has been strong in that community – a good example of the kind of rural community that would have inadequate health-care resources without CHCs.

“People have been very happy and willing to participate in letting their state and national representatives, including the governor, know about their support for Medicaid expansion and for avoiding the sequester,” King said.

For more information about Piedmont Health, call (919) 933-8494 or visit www.piedmonthealth.org.