

County is One, Critical, Piece of Large Health Care Reform Puzzle Ready and Committed to Success

By Kristina Grogan

We are less than two days away from the Affordable Care Act (ACA) taking a major step forward as millions of individuals and families begin to take advantage of the newly available opportunities to enroll in Health Care coverage.

For many residents in our county, the County of Mendocino is where the rubber meets the road in Health Care Reform. The Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) is where many people will turn to understand their expanded Health Care coverage options available either through the expansion of Medicaid, known as Medi-Cal in California, or through the State Insurance Exchange, known as Covered California, which will offer income-based federal subsidies.

It is estimated that nearly 5,000 residents will be eligible for Medi-Cal or will qualify for tax subsidies through Covered California. The total number of people who might take advantage of the Health Care offerings through Covered California as individuals or as a small business is, at this moment, yet to be determined.

With the support of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors, Health and Human Services Agency has been tirelessly working on implementation activities to increase their existing resources. They understand that they are to play a critical role in the implementation of the expansion of Health Care. They are prepared and ready to assist the influx of clients while still serving their existing clientele. However, they're just one piece of the puzzle.

Other entities at the State and Federal levels are key pieces of the puzzle too. HHSA has been working with partners such as Covered California, the California Department of Health Care Services, the Federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and the IRS on procedures and technology that must work together to get people smoothly enrolled in coverage and receiving their federal tax subsidies.

All the pieces of the puzzle have to fit together. How well all the technology and procedures will work together will not be seen until well after October 1, 2013. Undoubtedly, there will be problems – some with easy fixes, some that are more difficult to overcome – that local agencies will have to address.

For the next several months, it will be a very fluid environment. Know that your County HHSA and County staff are doing everything under their control to bring Health Care coverage and the expansion into your community.

The implementation of the Affordable Care Act's Health Care measures integrates nicely with the Health and Human Services Agency's core values: In partnership with the community, HHSA will support and empower families and individuals to live healthy, safe and sustainable lives in healthy environments, through advocacy, services and policy development.

County governments have traditionally been the conduit for many State and Federally funded programs to move out into the community. For instance, to enroll for medical

benefits, the applicant usually had to visit the Health and Human Services Agency. This process continues under ACA, but with the expansion of Medi-Cal and the inclusion of Covered California, a large number of community agencies are now able to assist as well.

HHSA and community agencies have been working together in preparation for the new opportunities available to a large number of people under the Affordable Care Act. These organizations are your medical clinics, your family resource centers and maybe even your insurance agent. They have hired the workers, learned the new processes, been through multiple trainings and upgraded their technological equipment. These local people are the greatest resource that Mendocino County has to understand the nooks and crannies of Health Care Reform and leverage the benefits of the new health care system.

Megan Van Sant from Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency is the Outreach Coordinator within the Employment and Family Assistance Services of HHSA. She is working with community agencies to coordinate local efforts to bring the new Health Care Reform benefits to the public.

Megan states, "In Mendocino County, we are truly fortunate to have a strong coalition of clinics, family resource centers, and other community-based organizations who are committed to working together to implement the Affordable Care Act. Our community of Certified Enrollment Counselors will be able to provide a friendly, convenient, local opportunity for our county's residents to get help with enrollment. By early November, our Certified Enrollment Counselors will be fully trained and ready to help!"

As the clock ticks down to October 1, Mendocino County is very fortunate in all the preparations that have been made both by the County Government and their community agency partners. Mendocino is in the best place it can be at this point in time as we venture into October 1 and beyond. Your County Government and its agency partners will adjust as needed to serve you and your community to the best of their ability.

If you have questions please call the Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency at 707-463-5437. Calls will be accepted Monday through Thursday, and your call will be returned in approximately 24-hours if you leave a message.

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