

Network seeks aid to build clinic for poor in Collier after Gov. Scott vetoes \$3 million

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(Photo: Andrey Popov)

It serves 60 percent of Collier County's kids and more of the area's poor than any other clinic, but few people have any idea the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida even exists.

"I call this Naples' best-kept secret," Adria Starkey, vice chairman of the Healthcare Network foundation, told a group of friends during a recent private bus tour of its clinics.

But that's a problem when it comes to raising money for the network's new Golden Gates Estates clinic, which comes with a price tag of \$18 million.

The network thought it could rely on \$3 million from the state this year, but Gov. Rick Scott vetoed the line item in the budget.

So now the group is making its case to the community as it tries to raise money for the new center.

"Healthcare Network is absolutely crucial to the health and well-being of those most in need in Collier County. It is imperative that we serve the growing need in Golden Gate," Starkey said later in an interview.

The network's CEO, Mike Ellis, said the 50,000-square-foot unit — the network's largest yet — will provide for a population that has moved from Immokalee to the Estates.

Ellis said the network raises money for its buildings and then handles the other costs on its own.

The network's whole spectrum of care will be provided to patients in the new clinic. This care includes pediatrics, behavioral health, women's care, internal medicine, family practice, senior care, pharmacy services and adult/children's dental services.

Ellis said what separates the network from other health care providers is its integrated care model, which combines behavioral and dental health with primary care.

The Healthcare Network is one of the only clinics in Southwest Florida to provide this type of integrated care.

"To me, this is huge, being able to offer behavioral health services in all your offices," Ellis said. "It started off in all our pediatric offices, and now we have Ph.D. psychologists available in all of our clinics."

In addition, the network frequently collaborates with the David Lawrence Center to ensure that its patients get access to psychiatrists when necessary.

A [study \(https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/resources/new-and-notables/economic-impact-integrated-medical-behavioral-healthcare-implications\)](https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/resources/new-and-notables/economic-impact-integrated-medical-behavioral-healthcare-implications) by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated centers that integrate behavioral and medical health could save \$26 billion to \$48 billion annually in costs.

The Healthcare Network has 19 regular clinics and two mobile clinics in Collier County. Most of its patients — 70 percent — are children.

But although the services are laudable in the eyes of many, Gov. Scott canceled extra money for the center this year because he had objected to the way the money would be spent.

"The following is vetoed because the program is not for services and is for the construction of a private facility," Scott wrote in a [statement \(http://www.flgov.com/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/FloridaFirst2016.pdf\)](http://www.flgov.com/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/FloridaFirst2016.pdf) after he made \$256 million in vetoes for 2016.

Health care makes up \$30.8 billion of Florida's state budget.

About 800,000 of Florida's working poor are uninsured since the House decided to not expand Medicaid in 2015.

Sen. Kathleen Passidomo, vice chairwoman of the Health Policy Committee and a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee for Health and Human Services, said she thinks clinics like the network's could help solve the financial burden hospitals face when the uninsured show up at emergency rooms.

"The main thing is to divert them from the ER," Passidomo said.

Passidomo said there were "myriad" health clinics across the state with "different organizational structures and health care delivery models."

She said that whatever model the state embraces to deal with the uninsured, the model should involve early screenings that detect both behavioral and physical health problems in children.

"A lot of these people, who have problems later in life, didn't get care when they were young," Passidomo said.

The Healthcare Network is a Federally Qualified Health Center. These centers are federally mandated to serve the patients regardless of their ability to pay.

Currently, there are 49 Federally Qualified Health Centers in the state, providing about 1.3 million patients with care in 450 locations.

Federally Qualified Health Centers have to see patients whether they have insurance or not.

Andrew Behrman, president and CEO of the Florida Association of Community Health Centers, said he thinks FQHCs could expand to provide care for the uninsured after the state decided against expanding Medicaid to cover them.

"We are very outcome-driven organizations. We have a lot of positive patients outcomes in diabetes and heart disease. When you can bring that to the Legislature and show them it has a direct impact on patient care and cost, they see the value.

"Part of this whole concept of focusing on primary and preventative care has a huge impact on the bottom line," Behrman said.

But there's an unknown as well. A number of Federally Qualified Health Centers' patients have been able to gain health insurance under the Affordable Care Act, through the certified application counselors found at each FQHC. If the exchange program is repealed and those people once again become uninsured, the community health centers still would see the patients, but they couldn't get paid for the services.

"If and when they find out how they will peel back Obamacare, I am hopeful they will do this slowly, taking into consideration the millions of patients who have been able to finally get health insurance," Behrman said.

"Because it's not a question of whether we want to help these patients," he said. "That is what we do; it is our mission to serve all patients. But like everything else, at the end of the day, we've got to find a way to pay the providers."

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