

Signups begin for low income health program

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Dozens of people stood in line to apply for ViaCare, some as early as 6:30 a.m. Monday, on the first day for poor, uninsured residents to sign up for the county's new low income health program.

A handful of people began lining up at the county-owned hospital more than an hour before applications were available, said a Natividad Medical Center spokeswoman.

An estimated 60 applications were handed out, and about 25 completed applications turned in by mid-afternoon at Natividad.

At just three of the six sites around the county where applications were available, including Natividad, and sites in Seaside and King City, an estimated 80 were picked up and about 35 handed back in.

In the midst of Monday's initial response, county officials joined community and labor leaders at a press conference to laud the program as a small but essential step toward major implementation of the Affordable Care Act at the beginning of next year.

Most of those who spoke gave a nod to the dedication of those who helped push the county toward the temporary program, designed as a bridge to national reform. It is expected to offer limited health coverage to 500 to 600 people while building a waiting list that can serve as a kind of database for getting the county's estimated 60,000 uninsured residents enrolled in coverage as soon as possible.

After a lengthy delay, Monterey County became the second to last county in the state to implement a bridge program.

The Rev. Dave Grishaw Jones of the community organization COPA, which backed ViaCare's implementation and sponsored Monday's press conference, lauded the "hard work, good politics, and simple human decency" that resulted in the temporary program.

Alicia Hernandez Sanchez, associate director of the Central Coast Center for Independent Living, said collaboration between county officials and community leaders would need to continue for national reform to succeed locally.

"Every step we take toward public health, toward better coverage, is a huge step," Jones said.

Supervisor Jane Parker praised community leaders for demanding the program, and Supervisor Simon Salinas lauded the move toward universal health coverage and wellness. He became emotional as he remembered his mother suffering from tooth pain because she didn't have dental coverage.

Natividad CEO Harry Weis called ViaCare an "important step" in the statewide effort to improve Medi-Cal and improve the health status of all residents, including the uninsured, by offering higher quality care at lower cost in the future.

Two members of COPA, in-home care worker Mario Torres and Pacific Grove church leader Vivienne Moore, told about the difficulty of getting health care for serious medical conditions and the difference access to care through ViaCare and the ACA would make in their lives.

County health director Ray Bullick said the number of local uninsured "really speaks to the gains we need to make in health care in the future," and said public health depends on working together. County social services director Elliott Robinson said the goal is to "create a culture of (health care) coverage" and urged those at the press conference to get the word out about the ACA and impending implementation.

Cesar Lara, Monterey Bay Central Labor Council executive director, said health care coverage for those in this

country illegally remains unresolved, and added that his organization would officially join COPA to work on a range of issues including immigration reform and affordable housing needs.

Weis said ViaCare will require the county to provide about \$5.52 million in funding, but that amount will depend on the number of local residents who qualify for the program and the actual costs of the coverage offered. The state, not the county, determines when enrollment ceases and how many participants can be accommodated, he said.

The program assigns participants to a primary care provider at one of a number of designated clinics where basic health care will be offered, with referrals to specialty services as needed.

Those accepted into the program will be notified by mail within 45 to 50 days, and can access care afterward.

For more information on the ViaCare low income health program, visit www.ViaCareMC.com or call 783-2400.