

## Western Massachusetts

# Health Access Network Notes

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COMMUNITY PARTNERS, INC.

February 1, 2008

Jones Library – Amherst, MA

### ISSUES & OBSERVATIONS:

A summary of new program information, observations, upcoming events, job & training opportunities shared by HAN members

#### Outreach

- HAN members continue to do enrollments; many people they see are shocked, confused, and angry that they will have to pay a penalty for being uninsured in 2007.
- There appears to be an increase in people opting for Commonwealth Choice, though many are also choosing not to take insurance due to affordability.
- Some immigrants have been hesitant to apply for coverage when they visit a health center. It is impossible to reassure them that there is no risk of deportation given the political climate.

#### Affordability Concerns

- Older individuals who have small increases in income must sometimes switch from Commonwealth Care to Commonwealth Choice. With a modest increase in their income, they may go from a premium of \$100/month to about \$400/month. Many of them will end up choosing to pay the penalty and go without insurance.
- People accessing outpatient services, such as cardiac rehabilitation, may have co-pays of up to \$75 a visit for ongoing therapies. Previously, these costs were covered by the Uncompensated Care Pool. People are deciding to forego their therapies.

#### Program Issues

##### MassHealth/Commonwealth Care

- Though new enrollments are speedier, MassHealth Enrollment Centers are behind in processing paperwork for existing clients. Many clients have not received eligibility

review forms for the past two years.

- It is unclear whether MassHealth members under age 65 who inherit money that puts their income over the limit for a particular year can keep their health care coverage.
- One self-employed client received an eligibility review and sent it out in the beginning of January with his 2006 taxes, since his 2007 taxes were not ready. His coverage was terminated until he submits his 2007 tax return. (Sometimes outreach workers are able to get around this issue by putting together statements of income and expenses.)
- **Continuity of care:** A young man with extreme epilepsy had to have certain tests done in Boston area hospitals, but was told he would have to change doctors to get access to the necessary equipment.

### Medicare

- People who are HIV-positive and enrolled in Medicare Part D must change medications frequently. They often find their new drugs aren't on the formulary for the plan they picked. (If they are on Prescription Advantage and Medicare, they may be able to switch plans once during the year, even if they are not dual-enrolled.)
- There have been some reports of misinformation on the medicare.gov website's plan comparison tool – if you find an error and can prove it, call CMS.
- The general enrollment period for Medicare Part B is January 1 – March 31, with coverage effective July 1. Please try to encourage clients to call or use the internet, rather than drop in at the Social Security Office, because they have been receiving upwards of 400 visits a day.

### Prescription Advantage

- People under age 65 who are disabled with Medicare are only eligible for Prescription Advantage if they are under 188% FPL. Those who are between 188-300% FPL may face massive drug costs.
- Prescription Advantage is experiencing some errors with reassignments, which hopefully are clearing up now. Contact SHINE with any outstanding issues at (413) 773-5555.

### **Provider shortage**

- Community Health Centers in Western Mass., including the Chicopee Health Center, are currently looking for doctors.
- A special legislative commission has been formed to address the lack of ob/gyn providers in Western Mass. We are considered medically underserved in that field. We can expect a report to come out in June.
- Many private doctors are not contracted with the state; it is difficult to find any place to refer patients that is still accepting new patients.

### **Department of Public Health (DPH) update – Bill O'Connell**

After looking at regional data and hearing from the 8 regional dialogues that new Commissioner John Auerbach conducted across the state, DPH has identified 5 priority areas:

- Supporting the success of Health Care Reform;
- Addressing racial and ethnic health disparities;
- Promoting wellness in the workplace, home, and schools;
- Managing chronic disease; and
- Strengthening local and state public health infrastructure.

Geoff Wilkinson came on board 3 months ago to oversee local and regional public health and will be working to strengthen regional health offices. DPH will be looking at how local communities and Boards of Health can partner to pool public health resources on a regional basis.

## Other Issues

- The Governor's budget includes \$45.8 for transitioning and diverting people away from nursing homes and into community-based services. It will be important to keep an eye on this funding because it is likely to come under attack.
- Agencies are still looking for people who speak Burmese; the first family of Burmese refugees has arrived in Western Mass.

## Resources

- Casa Latina has the capacity to interpret between English and Spanish, Khmer, Portuguese, Polish, and Russian. For referrals for doing enrollments in any of these languages, please call (413) 586-1569.
- The Chicopee Health Center has a new location at 505 Front Street with a dental department. This site is currently accepting new patients for dental appointments, but not for medical. The only insurance they are not accepting is Health New England. The main number is (413) 420-2222.
- The Cooley Dickinson Physician's Network is now accepting anyone up to 300% FPL (it was 225%). (The Physician's Network is not considered insurance.)
- Western Mass. Legal Services has developed a rapid response plan if there is an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid in the area; those needing help can call them at (413) 781-7814.