

Western Massachusetts

Health Access Network Notes



COMMUNITY PARTNERS, INC.

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Jones Library – Amherst, MA

GUEST PRESENTATION

The Illusion of Coverage, Credit Cards and Medical Debt:

Andrew Cohen, Community Research Coordinator, The Access Project

The Access Project is a national organization based in Boston and has served as a resource center for local communities working to improve health and healthcare access since 1998. The Access Project works to strengthen community action, promote social change, and improve health, especially for those who are most vulnerable. By supporting local initiatives and community leaders, The Access Project is dedicated to strengthening the voice of underserved communities in the public and private policy discussions that directly affect them.

Andrew runs The Access Project's Medical Debt Remediation Program, which operates in partnership with Health Law Advocates and the Health Care for All Helpline. The Medical Debt Remediation Program

- works with people free of charge to manage and reduce their medical debt
- identify trends and patterns within healthcare to help monitor private insurance and public programs
- raises awareness about medical debt

The Program has worked with over 90 clients, whose medical debt totaled 1.2 million dollars. Over 40 cases have been resolved: public programs paid over \$387,000 of their cumulative debt, mostly through the UCP. Medical providers donated \$52,000. Insurance companies paid over \$70,000.

Andrew is seeking to expand his program, and welcomes referrals – especially from Western Massachusetts. He can be reached at (617) 654-9911 x231, toll-free (866) 918-5232, or acohen@accessproject.org. Click here for a [one-page flyer](#) for your use with clients.

Click here for the compact handbook [Medical Debt: A Guide for Massachusetts Advocates](#), from the Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Boston Bar Association and Health Law Advocates.

Click here for [Borrowing to Stay Healthy: How Credit Card Debt Is Related to Medical Expenses](#), a report from The Access Project and Demos.

Selected facts about medical debt:

- Medical debt is money owed for any type of medical service or product, even when converted into other forms.
- 1 in 5 adults under 65 had medical debt, and the majority (62%) were insured.
- Medical debt can show up on a credit report, which can make it difficult to get an apartment or buy a car.
- One-third of people surveyed had used up all of their savings in paying medical costs.
- Medical debt can be seen as a pre-existing condition. People with medical debt, regardless of whether or not they have insurance, will take longer to seek care.

Exchange with HAN

Q: What are people asked when they call the Access Project?

A: People call because they have gotten a referral. They start out by telling their story, including what their insurance coverage is now, where they owe the money, how much they owe, if they still have the paperwork, the medical and family situation, how they got their insurance, etc. After it is figured out how much they owe and to whom, advice is given on how to gather the information needed to solve the problem.

Q: Do you or the client negotiate (with the insurance plans or collection agents)?

A: We try to let the client do it. First we help them gather all of the information needed starting at the bottom, but then if needed we take over.

Q: Do you ever work with people to avoid getting into medical debt?

A: Not as yet, because we haven't solicited those referrals yet.

Q: Does your income level matter?

A: Income does not matter for Access Project services, but if I have to refer you to the Health Law Advocates, you must be at or below 300% of the federal poverty level. I refer people who may be eligible for public programs to HCFA.

In addition to directly helping people manage their medical debt, the Access Project documented and analyzed insured people's experiences with medical debt in a report, "**The Illusion of Coverage:**"

- what happens when private insurance products fail to protect people from financial hardship and don't guarantee access to care when they become ill or injured
- insurance characteristics and processes that cause medical debt
- lack of meaningful choices for people purchasing health plans
- the consequences of medical debt caused by inadequate coverage

The report also provides recommendations on how to provide people access to comprehensive and affordable insurance products. The report is based on in-depth interviews with 45 people in seven states who accrued medical debt despite having health insurance. Click here for the [full report](#).