

**Esperanza Care of Monterey County**

**OVERVIEW:** The Esperanza Care Program provides equitable access to health care services for Monterey County residents who do not qualify for full-scope Medi-Cal or have insurance.

**CHALLENGE:** In Monterey County, it is estimated that there are between 45,000 and 50,000 uninsured residents. Many live in mixed immigration-status families, where one family member may be undocumented, and work in the agriculture and hospitality industries. A large percentage of these residents make less than 138% of the federal poverty level and do not qualify for full-scope Medi-Cal and have no other insurance. For individuals, that is an income of less than \$17,775 per year, or less than \$36,570 per year for a family of four. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, roughly 45% of undocumented immigrants are uninsured compared to 9% of citizens.

**SOLUTION:** Natividad Medical Center, a safety-net hospital owned and operated by Monterey County, believes that all people, regardless of ability to pay or immigration status, should have access to medical care to live healthy, happy and productive lives. In 2015, the hospital joined with the County Board of Supervisors to roll out the “Pilot Project for the Uninsured” – initially a \$500,000 program. Community-based organizations such as Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action (COPA) were instrumental in advocating for establishing the “Pilot Project for the Uninsured” to ensure residents not eligible for health insurance had access to health care services. The Esperanza Care Program (Esperanza means “hope” in Spanish), as it is known today, was established in 2017 and replaced and expanded the pilot project. It is a collaboration between Monterey County Health Department and Natividad Medical Center. Today, the program is built into the annual hospital budget. For the 2021-2022 Fiscal Year, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors approved a budget increase from \$2 million to \$2.5 million.

**INNOVATION:** Pacific Health Alliance administers the Esperanza Care Program. It is open to anyone in Monterey County 26 years and older who meets income requirements and does not qualify for full-scope Medi-Cal or insurance. Outreach to immigrant communities through doctors, Natividad’s community outreach team, community-based organizations such as COPA, and other trusted messengers helps alleviate some of the fear many undocumented immigrants and their family members have surrounding assistance programs. Esperanza Care provides residents with crucial access to primary care doctors at the Monterey County Health Department and referrals to health care specialists at Natividad. Coverage includes neurology, specialty, diabetes and heart clinics, as well as laboratory, radiology, ultrasound and

MRI services at Natividad. Walgreens covers selected prescriptions. These are vital services that would typically be out of reach for many undocumented people without insurance.

**RESULTS:** Studies show that having a primary care doctor keeps patients healthier, resulting in fewer hospitalizations. Often, primary care physicians are the ones who discover the first signs of cancer or disease. When people do not regularly see a primary care physician, they often end up in the emergency room with more critical injuries and illnesses. What could have been a controllable condition — like high cholesterol — turns into a life-threatening heart attack. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that six out of 10 adults live with chronic conditions like diabetes, cancer, or heart disease. Uninsured rates for those older than 50 are especially concerning given higher levels of health care need. In addition, health disparities among minority populations account for poor health outcomes, including higher disease burden and premature death rates.

The COVID-19 pandemic of the past year has shown that access to timely health care services is more important than ever for all in California. Natividad is proud to have recently celebrated the fifth anniversary of Esperanza Care, and on July 1, 2021, the hospital expanded the program from 3,500 residents to serve 4,500 residents. With the availability of no-cost treatment, preventative services, and medication for treatable medical conditions, our participants are living healthier lives.

**REPLICABILITY:** According to the UC Berkeley Labor Center, nearly 3.2 million Californians will remain uninsured in 2022, or about 9.5% of the population age 64 and younger. Undocumented Californians make up the largest group of the uninsured (nearly 1.3 million residents), and those 26 and older are excluded from federal Affordable Care Act subsidies and Medicaid eligibility. Thus, there is a strong need for health care programs that reduce the gap in health insurance coverage and address fear and avoidance of health care systems. Until Medi-Cal expands coverage to all low-income adults regardless of immigration status, other counties should consider partnering with public health care organizations and nonprofit community service organizations in their area to introduce inclusive health care programs like Esperanza Care for the good of entire communities.

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