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## Community health-care centers, such as Hudson Headwaters, critical

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Health care in America is pricey.

Getting it costs money "" especially if you're under- or uninsured. Providing it costs money "" taxpayer dollars pay for those who are on Medicaid and Medicare and more often than not, employers and employees now share the cost of health insurance rather than it being a 100-percent paid-for benefit. Keeping up with the latest technological advances in health care isn't cheap, either.

But, despite the costs, we Americans believe in a strong health-care system; yet we have paid for it dearly. In 2005, Americans spent \$2 trillion "" that's 16 percent of the entire nation's economy for that year "" on health care.

As resources shrink and demand increases, we will continue to scramble to save a few dollars here and there but not necessarily make a significant impact on the way health care is delivered. Americans often look to greener pastures for innovation and change. Perhaps it is time to look in our own backyards and recognize that we already have a way of providing excellent, high-quality health care while keeping costs down "" our federally qualified community health centers.

For over 40 years, community health centers such as Hudson Headwaters Health Network in Glens Falls and throughout the Adirondacks have been providing quality, accessible primary care, decreasing health-care disparities and increasing positive outcomes while at the same time saving money.

A new study by the National Association of Community Health Centers, the Robert Graham Center and Capital Link titled Access Granted: The Primary Care Payoff, finds that community health centers are a smart investment for a nation desperate for high quality, accessible and affordable health care.

Across the country, 1,100 community health centers serve more than 16 million people at 6,000 plus sites. But there are still another 44 million uninsured or under-insured people in this country who do not access community health centers.

Over 1 million New Yorkers receive care from the 50 community health centers spread throughout the Empire State at more than 425 sites. In 2006, Hudson Headwaters served 55,938 patients.

Given the demographics of who health centers serve "" seven out of 10 live in poverty "" one could conclude that providing care for the uninsured, for those on Medicaid and for those who live in under-served, racially and ethnically mixed urban communities "" would be more expensive. That conclusion would be wrong.

Access Granted found that medical expenses for community-health-center patients are 41 percent lower compared to patients seen elsewhere "" that's a \$1,801 saving per patient. Community health centers serve as their patients' health care homes, providing regular and continuous sources of patient-centered care that are coordinated by a team of medical professionals committed to continually improving the quality of health-care delivery. As a result, chronic diseases are better managed, emergency-room visits and hospitalizations are curtailed, and between \$9.9 billion and \$17.6 billion in precious health care is saved.

Because the nation's health-care crisis has shifted just from the realm of the poor and disenfranchised to the doorsteps of middle-class American families, the gap in services if left unattended will continue to grow. Despite health centers' success in providing excellent health care at a reasonable cost, their capacity to care for growing numbers of people will remain stagnant unless federal and state governments make an investment in growing and strengthening the community-health-center network.

Our goal is to serve 30 million people throughout the country by 2015. If we do this, community health centers could save the health-care system \$22.6 billion to \$40.6 billion. Cost savings for New York state range from \$1.7 billion to \$3 billion, savings for the Adirondacks and the Capital Region would be \$139 million to \$248 million.

In addition to the savings community health centers bring to government and taxpayers alike, they also serve as important economic-development engines for their communities. Nationally, they have had an overall direct and indirect economic impact of \$12.6 billion and produced 143,000 jobs in some of the country's most economically deprived neighborhoods.

New York state is one of two states in the nation where community health centers have the greatest dollar-for-dollar impact "" the other is California. The 425 health-care-delivery sites of New York's community health centers generate over \$1.14 billion annually, creating 11,745 jobs.

Fixing our health-care system won't be easy. But community health centers are one of the keys to opening the door to reform. They're an excellent public investment that generates substantial benefits for patients, communities, governments and taxpayers "" for all of us.

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