



## How West Michigan program is improving health, reducing costs for low-income families

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**Ann Byle | The Grand Rapids Press**  
By

GRAND RAPIDS — Teasha Beard hasn't had one of her four sons in the emergency room for an asthma attack in a year. This is a drastic turnaround for a mom who used to visit the ER repeatedly each month — sometimes every day — because she had no other way for her boys to get the asthma care they needed.

The problem was transportation. She missed appointments with the doctor because her ride fell through; public transportation, with five children, was difficult; and because she could only arrange rides after 5 p.m., when doctor's offices are closed. Her sons — Damarcus Horsley, 11; DaShawn Beard, 8; Sinai Davison, 5; and Jeremiah Davison, 4 — ended up in the ER for asthma treatments.



Cory Olsen | The Grand Rapids Press

Teasha Beard with two of her sons, Jeremiah Davison, 4, and Sinai Davison, 5, in their Grand Rapids home.

"Someone from Priority Health contacted me and set me up with the CHAP program, which helps me with transportation," said Beard, who also has a daughter, Onresha, 14. "If my kids are sick, I can get them to the doctor's office right away. They have improved a whole lot."

CHAP — Children's Healthcare Access Program — is a collaborative, community-based program designed to improve the health of low-income children on Medicaid and, at the same time, decrease health care costs by better utilizing existing resources. CHAP was launched in 2008 by First Steps, in partnership with Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Priority Health, the Great Start Collaborative of Kent County, the Asthma Network of West Michigan, Cherry Street Health Services, a number of private-practice doctors and other health care and human services agencies.

Results after two years are positive.

- Emergency room visits among CHAP clients with higher needs — about 2,200 children a year — have declined 35 percent.
- In-patient hospital admissions for the high-need group dropped 62 percent in a comparison with the 12-month

periods before and after CHAP involvement.

- 40 percent of children with asthma have an asthma action plan in place, thanks to collaboration with the Asthma Network of West Michigan. An asthma action plan is a set of instructions to be used when a patient has an asthma flare-up.

More than 50,000 children in Kent County are on Medicaid, though only those insured by Priority Health and seen by participating practices, about 15,000, are eligible for CHAP. Fourteen to 16 percent of the eligible population gets referred by their medical home (primary care doctor's office) for CHAP services in a given year.

Seventeen primary care offices participate in CHAP, the largest being Cherry Street Health Services with nine sites and the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital General Pediatric Clinic. Among the CHAP-eligible population of 15,000, emergency department visits have decreased

14 percent, while in-patient hospital admissions are down 12 percent, thanks to general improvement in provider office operations, such as increased same-day access, evening hours, improved phone triage, etc.

The First Steps Commission is a group of Grand Rapids-area leaders whose guiding principle is that all children deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential. They recognized the need for a program to help children on Medicaid gain better access to health care.

When Dr. Tom Peterson, a former private-practice pediatrician, presented a program he had seen in Colorado called CCHAP, the commission agreed to create a similar program.

CHAP's early goals were to provide increased access to medical care via medical homes, provide education and support for health practices and clinics involved in the program and provide health care and support services for children and their families. Specific goals were to lower emergency room visits and inpatient admissions to the hospital.

"We had no idea if we could lower emergency department visits or inpatient admissions," said Peterson, medical director of CHAP. "But in the first year, they lowered significantly."

One of the first to embrace CHAP was Priority Health and its chief medical officer, Dr. Jim Byrne. Priority Health insures approximately 25,000 children on Medicaid throughout Kent County, though only 15,000 are eligible for CHAP because they are assigned to a CHAP participating practice.

"The thing that hooked me," Byrne said, "was a study that showed how different the clinical health outcomes were for the Medicaid population versus the insured population. There is a much higher death rate, rate of chronic diseases such as asthma, and higher hospitalization rate (for the Medicaid population)."

Priority Health had to make a monetary commitment up front because the CHAP program meant higher payments to doctors seeing their Medicaid patients. Byrne said the company didn't know if it could recoup that investment.

"We found that the extra dollars we paid out to doctors were matched very closely by the decrease in ER visits and

the decrease in hospitalizations," he said. "At the end of the day, we were able to provide better, more coordinated care and we were able to get kids out of the ER and hospitals."

Maureen Kirkwood is program manager for CHAP, charged early on with getting private practice physicians on board with the program. She, Peterson and Byrne visited doctors around Kent County, offering increased payments from Medicaid for them to begin offering medical homes to Medicaid patients.

The obstacles seemed significant. Often, Medicaid patients needed more than typical office hours, additional services such as social workers and support staff, and even transportation to get to office visits. CHAP contracts with cab companies and private transportation vendors to provide rides for its participants.

"Now, we have confirmation that these direct services are impactful. We've seen collaboration with physicians, seen multiple levels of change," Kirkwood said.

Dr. Kristin Stout is a pediatrician at Cherry Street Health Services' Westside Health Center. She sees Priority Health Medicaid children among her many patients.

"The CHAP program provides a lot of services for our kids. We use it to help coordinate care for kids who have asthma, for instance, and for kids who have struggles with mental health issues," said Stout, who has been at Westside since 2008.

Transportation and education are key aspects of CHAP that benefit both Westside and patients, Stout said. To enter the behavioral health system in Kent County, parents must make the first call, which can be intimidating. But assistance from a CHAP social worker moves the process along. CHAP workers also educate parents on viewing the doctor's office as their medical home.

"If we notice patients are going to ER for acute things, we can call CHAP and they help educate patients on going to their medical home first," said Stout. "Also, having CHAP provide transportation gets our patients here, which helps our flow; we don't have as many no-shows."

CHAP is in its third year, the final year full funding through philanthropic and foundation donations is available, though some grant money will continue. The successes have been counted well beyond simply reducing ER visits and hospital stays. Wayne County is replicating the program now, and Kalamazoo County is planning and lining up funding to start CHAP in early 2012.

"CHAP has energized and provided opportunities for private practice pediatricians to get involved in the community,"

#### CHAP services

Contact Children's Healthcare Access Program at 632-1015 or visit [firststepskent.org](http://firststepskent.org):

- Transportation to a child's medical home (doctor's office) for visits
- Certified asthma educator to come to the home to help keep child's asthma under control
- Home visits by nurse or community health worker to provide health education
- Connection to counseling services
- Connection to community resources such as food pantries, lead screening and infant support programs
- Translation services

Peterson said. "These health care providers have learned how to work better with the Medicaid population."

Another benefit touted by Peterson and Kirkwood is the hands-on leadership provided by pediatricians throughout the area. They have come together to work on additional issues such as obesity, mental health and dental care. Stout is involved in a CHAP work group — along with local health organization leaders — focusing on behavioral health.

"We sit around the table and work toward solutions for improving access to behavioral health services, and also to improve communication between behavioral and medical health services," Stout said.

A third benefit is the integration of all the health systems to create a cohesive whole.

"I was in practice for 15 years and didn't know about half of the services out there," Peterson said. "Now, all levels are meeting to talk about how to do better care for Medicaid kids."

Challenges remain. Funding must continue to sustain the CHAP program, perhaps from federal and state budgets. Peterson sees statewide involvement, saying, "we can't do it in this county only."

Families also present challenges.

"Some families just aren't going to change their behaviors," Kirkwood said.

And the ever-changing atmosphere of politics, as Peterson calls it, means programs such as CHAP are at the mercy of how government changes and operates under different leadership.

"There are so many positives, but who's going to step up and say, 'Here's what to do next?'" he said. "Our end goal is a better medical delivery system for the state of Michigan. I think it would be nationally recognized. We have to provide a service with enough benefits that others want to do it too," Peterson said.

The bottom line, for mothers such as Teasha Beard, is healthier children and a medical home for doctor visits and preventative care.

"They should have started a program like CHAP years ago. Since CHAP, we haven't missed one doctor's appointment," Beard said.

"I know that no matter where I live, my kids will be able to get to their doctor. That, to me, is a huge success. Making those appointments makes life better, and my kids are healthier."

Peterson agrees.

"I want better health care opportunities and outcomes for Medicaid kids. These are our children and they deserve access to high-quality care. We've latched on to a good way to do that with CHAP."

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