



## Health-care reform welcomed by those who serve the needy of Southwest Michigan

**By Margaret DeRitter | Kalamazoo Gazette**

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**KALAMAZOO** — The day after the U.S. House of Representatives passed historic health-care legislation, a doctor and patient at Kalamazoo's Family Health Center and the center's top administrator said they were thrilled by the vote.

"I don't normally watch television, but I'm a strong believer in this, and I stayed up (Sunday night) and managed to watch the whole thing," said Dr. Marguerite Saith on Monday afternoon.

Saith said she has been advocating some type of national health care for 10 years.

"I truly believe in my heart that every human being should have access to quality care," said Saith, who is in her 29th year of medical practice and has worked at the federally subsidized Family Health Center since 2008.

"I think we in America are going to lead the world again in medical care," added Saith, who is originally from Trinidad.

Denise Crawford, president and chief executive officer of the center, said she was recently in Washington, D.C., with other members of the National Association of Community Health Centers, advocating for national health-care legislation.

"I think it's phenomenal," Crawford said of the House vote approving health-care legislation. "I think it's far overdue."

The main bill has passed both the House and the Senate, but changes approved by the House must still go to the Senate, where debate could start Tuesday.

The new legislation, by extending health coverage to an estimated 32 million Americans who lack it, would "help people establish a medical home" where they could get comprehensive, preventative care instead of going to the emergency room for minor medical problems, Crawford said.

"They would get the care in the right place in the most effective manner," she said.

Saith said that because so many Americans don't have health insurance or are underinsured, the Family Health Center has seen "a tremendous rise in people with advanced medical conditions. ... They have multi-system diseases at advanced stages and need lots of coordinated care."

Don Leonard, of Kalamazoo, a 56-year-old patient who was at the Family Health Center on Monday afternoon, said he doesn't see the legislation having much of an impact on him because he's already covered by Medicaid.

"But I think it's a good thing," he said. "There's a lot of people who really need it. There's people who are dying or really sick who don't have it (health coverage). That's not right."

## **One quick fix**

Kalamazoo County has been “ahead of the curve” in caring for the uninsured, Saith said.

“We care for those who are less fortunate. ... We have the full support of both hospitals,” she said. “The whole medical community has a strong role in supporting our patients.”

In Kalamazoo County, about 3,500 people without health insurance who have a current medical condition have been able to qualify for the Kalamazoo County Health Plan, which gets money from the state and the local United Way, Crawford said.

Under the legislation approved by the House, those people and an undetermined number of others would become insurable with federal funds within 90 days of final passage of the health-care plan, Crawford said. According to an Associated Press report, a high-risk pool would offer this coverage until 2014, when Medicaid would expand significantly.

“There will be more money to cover more people” than the county health plan does, Crawford said. “Adult males are the majority who fall through the gap” now, she added.

Crawford also said she is happy that maximum lifetime dollar limits could no longer be placed on individual insurance policies. “It’s just gut-wrenching now when you reach the lifetime maximum,” she said.

She also noted that children would be able to stay on parents’ insurance policies up to age 26, three years longer than they can now.

Only a few aspects of the House-approved legislation that would take effect soon. Many parts of the legislation would not be implemented until 2014.

## **Increased demand**

If national health-care legislation is signed into law as expected, Saith and Crawford anticipate an even greater demand on the health-care system.

Saith said she’s concerned about the possibility of an “overburdened system.”

“Patients who suddenly get insurance often have a laundry list of medical problems,” she said.

But she is also hopeful that more doctors will go into primary care if reimbursement improves.

“I do medicine because I love what I do and because what I do makes a difference in patients’ lives,” she said. “That’s what doctors really love. And hopefully they’ll be able to have interpersonal relationships with patients in a more comprehensive manner.”

The Family Health Center, which operates five clinics and is planning to open a sixth this summer, now serves about 30,000 patients on Medicaid and about 30,000 uninsured patients, Crawford said.

She said the Family Health Center, like other federal subsidized community health centers, has received federal stimulus money and has been gearing up to serve more patients.

In just the past year, the center has hired 12 additional care providers — doctors, nurse practitioners or physician’s assistants — and expanded its hours to 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday.

It now has 20 providers and 126 other staff members.

“The stimulus ensured that community health centers would be stable,” Crawford said. The

federal government wanted to “make sure we could handle additional capacity.”

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