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Local reaction to health care vote: 'This is big, very big'

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After 40 years in public **health** service, Patricia Soares is certain of this: the vote to expand health care was "absolutely historic."

"I stayed up all night," she said. "This is big, very big."

But what it means now -- for Carla Hurst's asthma, bronchitis or sinus problems, for example -- is unclear.

"I'm thinking 'There's a lot of us who need **health insurance**. So ... now maybe we can work some of this out,'" Hurst said today at Waller Health Center on Cathedral Green, one of 18 Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) in Detroit.

Hurst's exam this day was covered by Weller, where Soares serves as clinical **services** director. But the 40-year-old Detroit woman will have to pick up the costs for about \$130 in several prescriptions -- "a lot of for someone with no income," she said. Those who help run Detroit's clinics for the uninsured said today that health care reform ultimately will help their bottom line, offering a stream of money to help balance patient care that federal funds barely cover now. But just when those funds will kick in, which patients it will cover, and precisely how care will change is still unclear.

"I've been in health administration for more years than I'd like to admit, and every time there's a major piece of legislation affecting **health care** or services, you're three or five years down the road from seeing (the changes)," said Joseph Ferguson, executive director of Advantage Health Centers, which operate Waller.

With a thick stack of medical files in her hands today, Waller's Dr. Barbra Alvir said that expanded health care ultimately will mean patients will see doctors more often -- avoiding the high-cost trips to emergency rooms when -- by that time -- health problems are critical and expensive to treat.

Several of her patients, she said, have had advanced stages of breast cancer before it was detected because they had no access to routine screenings. And diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure are common conditions for Weller's patients that often go dangerously untreated, even

undetected. "We need that focus on preventative medicine and that's going to help," Alvir said of the reform.

But there in lies a major challenge: Figuring out how an additional 32 million of the now-uninsured will fit into the nation's current medical **system**, said Lucille Smith, of the Voices of Detroit Initiative, which helps coordinate services among the FQHC's and other local healthcare providers for Wayne County's 300,000 uninsured residents.

"If you don't have enough primary care providers or family care physicians or access points to the system, then coverage doesn't mean much," she said.