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New Program brings Affordable Health Care to Uninsured Residents of Maricopa County

With a \$1.3 million federal grant and broad community support, HealthCare Connect will help low-income, uninsured Maricopa County residents who don't qualify for public health programs and don't have employer-sponsored insurance

PHOENIX, Ariz. (April 21, 2004) – A \$1.3 million federal grant has been secured to develop a new avenue of affordable health care for low-income uninsured residents of Maricopa County. The program is expected to reduce and more evenly distribute the cost to care for the uninsured, lessen inappropriate emergency room care and improve the overall general health of its members.

Called HealthCare Connect, the program is designed for low-to-middle income uninsured Maricopa County residents who earn too much income to qualify for public health programs such as Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS), but can't afford their own health insurance and aren't eligible for employer-sponsored health insurance. This segment includes most low-wage and part-time workers.

"HealthCare Connect will enable a large segment of Maricopa County's low-income, uninsured residents to access the medical services they need but haven't been able to afford without health insurance," said Tammy Stoltz, executive director of HealthCare Connect.

HealthCare Connect was founded with a \$1.3 million federal grant awarded last fall to the Arizona Association of Community Health Centers to establish the Healthy Community Access Program (HCAP) for eligible uninsured Maricopa County residents. Some 41 leaders from health care, nonprofit and community organizations wrote letters of support for the grant application.

HealthCare Connect, being modeled after Pima Community Access Program, a successful HCAP in Pima County with 8,000 members, is expected to begin enrolling members in Maricopa County by June. The program is open to all residents who meet the eligibility requirements, but enrollment efforts will initially focus on the central portion of the county, where an estimated 114,000 uninsured and medically underserved people reside.

People without health insurance typically forego or postpone preventive and routine health care until there's an emergency, which is a more costly and less effective route. Providing a system for the uninsured to receive coordinated, preventive and routine health care reduces the cost of the care, distributes the burden of caring for uninsured more evenly among community-minded physicians and health care providers who accept deeply discounted fees for their services and lessens the inappropriate use of emergency rooms for conditions that could have been prevented with early intervention.

Members of HealthCare Connect pay a low annual enrollment fee and low co-payments when they access medical services; they pay no monthly premiums and no health conditions are excluded.

Healthy Community Access Programs were established by a 2000 federal "Access to Health Care for the Uninsured" demonstration project that initially awarded grants to 23 counties across the nation, including the one in Pima County. Since then, the number of HCAPs has grown to 193 nationwide, with programs in Apache, Cochise, Pima, White Mountain, Yavapai and Yuma counties in Arizona. An additional 35 federal HCAP grants were awarded at the end of September 2003, including this one for Maricopa.

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