

Report highlights indigent care needs in Fresno Co.

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Written by Hannah Esqueda

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A new report by Health Access California has revealed that hundreds, and potentially thousands, of Central Valley residents still depend on indigent services despite increased access to state and federal health programs.

The statewide health care consumer advocacy coalition claims that number would be even higher if Fresno and Tulare counties broadened their requirements for indigent care programs.

Currently, Fresno County's Medically Indigent Services Program (MISP) is available to residents living at or below 114 percent of the federal poverty line. In Tulare County, the program covers individuals living at up to 275 percent of the poverty line.

By accepting undocumented individuals or raising the limit to at least 138 percent of the federal poverty line, both counties would be able to fill the gaps left by state and federal medical programs, said Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access California.

"Counties with broad indigent care programs are still seeing tens of thousands left [without coverage]," Wright said.

While Covered California and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) have relieved some pressure on county safety nets, the report found many undocumented and low-income residents still need to rely on indigent care programs. The organization's research also found that many California counties are looking for ways to end or limit indigent care programs, despite the continued need.

After the ACA took effect, Fresno County successfully sued to get out of a longstanding legal agreement to provide care to undocumented residents through MISP at Community Regional Medical Center. According to local advocacy group Fresno Building Healthy Communities, a state bill providing reimbursement funds to Fresno County for MISP was signed into law last year but has so far generated no long-term solutions. Undocumented residents remain without MISP coverage while the county renegotiates the program.

Wright said the decision to renegotiate indigent care in Fresno County will help the region once again fill the gap between state and federal medical programs and set an example for other counties in similar situations.

Studies show that the uninsured will live sicker, die younger and are one health emergency away from financial ruin, he said.

"Many counties will make plans about their indigent care programs soon as they prepare their annual budgets," he said. "We hope that this report will be used when making those decisions."

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