

Fix the Funding Cliff

Editor's Note: Doug Smith is the CEO of Greene County Health Care (GCHC). GCHC is a community health center in Snow Hill with facilities in Greene, Pitt and Pamlico counties that offer medical, dental and behavioral health care.

The waiting room of our health center is thousands of miles from the U.S. Capitol, but what happens under that dome directly affects our patients. Today, community health centers risk losing about 70% in funding. This is called the Funding Cliff.

Community Health Centers like ours bring a unique and important perspective to the national conversation on health care. GCHC is part of a nationwide network that started more than 50 years ago to provide quality primary care in places where doctors and services were scarce or non-existent. Our health centers have since grown to serve as the family doctor to more than 27 million Americans in communities all over the country - one in 12 Americans. We have saved countless lives providing affordable access to primary care. We have helped reduce the incidence of chronic disease in the most challenging rural and urban communities all over America. At a health center, patients have a more affordable option for preventive care than at a hospital emergency room. We generate \$24 billion in health care cost savings, according to the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC). We are also innovators - working with community partners to respond to public health crises, such as the opioid epidemic and the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston.

There is little doubt that health centers have contributed significantly to cost savings for the American taxpayer. Yet, it is not sufficient to describe us as just another health care program. We are problem-solvers that look beyond medical charts not only to prevent illness, but also to address the factors that actually cause poor health - homelessness, lack of nutrition, stress or unemployment and drug addiction.

For decades our health centers have drawn bipartisan support from U.S. presidents and lawmakers because of our record of success. Yet, such broad support may not be enough to ensure we can continue to serve people who need affordable primary care in the future.

Right now, Greene County Health Care is threatened with a severe loss in funding, as are other health centers in nearly 10,000 communities. This “funding cliff,” if not fixed by Congress by the end of this month, will directly and immediately affect the health of our communities. Unless the funding cliff is fixed, the community health center program will lose about 70% of its funding. The federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has projected a dramatic impact: closure of 2,800 health center locations, elimination of more than 50,000 jobs, and a loss of access to care for more than 9 million patients. Right now, more than 75 national organizations, representing doctors, nurses, hospitals, health centers, children, patients, the faith community, financial institutions and health care industry partners, are banding together and calling on lawmakers to extend health center funding before September 30.

Let’s hope our leaders pay attention and fix the funding cliff. Our health depends on it.