

Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration
Kimberly M. Alexander-Bratcher, MPH*

Safety Net Survey and Web Site www.nhealthcarehelp.org

A new and essential safety net resource for North Carolina will be launched this spring. The Web site, www.nhealthcarehelp.org, will provide a unified resource for locating safety net services throughout the state. As such, it will be an invaluable tool for improving access to health care services for the millions of uninsured and underserved people in North Carolina. Health care providers, patient advocates, and consumers will be able to search the database-driven website by service type, county, insurance status, and patient eligibility criteria.

Evolution of the Safety Net Web site

In 2004 with funding from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine (NC IOM) convened the Healthcare Safety Net Task Force to examine safety net services in North Carolina. The Task Force developed recommendations to expand and strengthen the service capacity of safety net providers. A group known as the Safety Net Advisory Council (SNAC) grew out of the Task Force. With support from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, the SNAC developed a web-based survey to collect and house information from the state's safety net organizations.

Through the survey, safety net organizations provided contact information, physical location, services offered, hours of operation, eligibility criteria (if any), forms of payment (eg insurance, sliding fee scale), and whether they were accepting new patients. Additional data were collected on the number of patients, patient visits, and the percentage of uninsured patients. To date more than 200 health care safety net organizations have participated in the survey. Safety net organizations can enter or edit their information at any time on the Web site (www.nhealthcarehelp.org). This spring, information gathered through the survey will be made available to the public at www.nhealthcarehelp.org. Another benefit of having access to these data is that they will provide an estimate of the number of uninsured individuals in North Carolina who are accessing health care through safety net organizations and help identify areas within the state with the most unmet need.

The Safety Net Web site is the result of the combined dedication of health care safety net organizations, foundations, and many other groups to improve the health of North Carolinians. To learn more about the Web site, visit www.nhealthcarehelp.org.

Examples of Safety Net Organizations in North Carolina

Community Care of North Carolina practices	Hospital outpatient clinics and centers
Federally certified rural health clinics	Project Access programs
Federally qualified community health centers	Public health departments
Federally qualified migrant health centers	Free clinics
School-based and school-linked health centers	State funded rural health centers