



MORE OF US ARE GOING WITHOUT NEEDED CARE

One in five Americans in 2007 reported delaying or not getting needed medical care in the previous 12 months, up significantly from one in seven in 2003, according to a study made public last week by the Center for Studying Health System Change, a think tank in Washington.

In 2007, more than 23 million people reported going without needed care and about 36 million people delayed care, for a total of about 59 million people

reporting access problems, according to the think tank's 2007 Health Tracking Household Survey, a nationally representative survey containing information on 18,000 people.

The 59 million people reporting access problems increasingly cited cost as an obstacle to needed care, along with rising rates of health plan and health system barriers, the study found.

Uninsured people continued to face far greater access problems and were almost three times as likely to report going without care as insured people: 17.5 percent, compared with 6.3 percent. However, insured people experienced a greater percentage increase in urgent medical needs compared with uninsured people: an increase of 62 percent for the insured, compared with an increase of 33 percent for the uninsured.

EXAMINATION ROOM WITH • ROBERT FRIEND

Chief of regional commission wants you healthy

ROBERT FRIEND



Chief executive, St. Louis Regional Health Commission

EDUCATION: Freund holds an MBA from the John Olin School of Business at Washington University in addition to his master's in health administration from the Washington University School of Medicine Health Administration Program.

CAREER: He has experience in strategic planning business development; finance from role as COO of a joint venture in the insurance industry; as a health care consultant for six years at Ernst & Young-LLP; and as executive director for a nonprofit group focusing on youth development.

Explain the role of the St. Louis Regional Health Commission.

The St. Louis Regional Health Commission is a nonprofit organization that works to improve access to health care services for all in St. Louis. RHC has 19 appointed commissioners and two 30-member advisory boards representing community members and health care providers.

Our members include leaders of governmental agencies, hospitals and health centers, area medical schools, community-based organizations, patients of our health care system and engaged citizens across our region.

As prices for other goods such as gasoline and food increase, what's the impact on people's ability to pay for medical care?

More than 600,000 individuals in Missouri live in poverty as defined by the federal government. These citizens continue to face great difficulties accessing health care due to financial barriers. For example, patients are reporting that they can't make it to

their doctor's appointment because they can't afford the gasoline; others report rationing needed medications to save dollars for food.

As prices for food and gas — and medical costs — increase while wages remain flat, even more people in our community face these difficult choices every day.

Even people with insurance are being asked to pay more of their medical bills. Is this having an impact as well?

An important study released this month by the Commonwealth Fund (www.commonwealthfund.org) found that the number of "under-insured" individuals — those who spend more than 10 percent of their income on out-of-pocket medical expenses — has risen by 60 percent in our country since 2003.

These 25 million "under-insured" Americans report access problems and financial stress similar to the 47 million uninsured Americans — more than half of the "under-insured" reported going without needed medical care — including

not seeing a doctor when sick, not filling prescriptions and not following up on recommended tests or treatments.

It is becoming clear that having health insurance no longer guarantees access to health care services in our current system.

If someone is having difficulty paying for care, where are some places they can turn?

St. Louis is fortunate to have an outstanding system of community health centers dedicated to providing health care services to all, regardless of the ability to pay.

These organizations, such as our four federally qualified health centers (Family Care Health Centers, Grace Hill Neighborhood Health Centers, Myrtle Hilliard Davis Comprehensive Health Centers, People's Health Centers), St. Louis ConnectCare and health centers run by the St. Louis County Department of Health, serve approximately 165,000 patients in over 450,000 encounters each year.

Information concerning these

organizations can be found at the website of the St. Louis Integrated Health Network at www.stlouishn.org.

Do you expect community health programs will be challenged by these same economic pressures?

Our community health centers have seen an increase of nearly 70,000 encounters between 2002 and 2006, despite significant financial challenges over this time due to the reduction in payments from the Medicaid program in Missouri.

More than 40 percent of the patients seen by our community health centers are uninsured, and this number has increased by 28 percent between 2002 and 2006.

It is doubtful that these organizations can continue to meet the increasing need for health care services for the uninsured in the St. Louis region without additional community support in the future.