

# Mending the safety net

**I**N THE MIDST of discouraging news about medical care for the poor, there is a ray of hope in St. Louis.

A coalition of public and private groups has raised more than \$7 million to mend the ripped safety net. It couldn't happen at a better time, coming after 90,000 people were cut from Missouri Medicaid this year and when Congress is weighing a \$10 billion cut in future Medicaid funding.

The new money will help assure a future for the four ConnectCare clinics in St. Louis, which had been operating under a federal program that was set to expire at the end of the year. The clinics will be upgraded. Two will become part of Grace Hill Neighborhood Health Centers. Two others will be absorbed by the Myrtle Hilliard Davis Comprehensive Health Centers.

ConnectCare will continue to operate an urgent care center and to provide specialty services. ConnectCare patients also will have access to new services, such as community health nursing and chronic disease management to ensure they're getting the help they need. Low income city residents with high blood pressure or diabetes will get continuing management of their chronic diseases.

The Missouri Foundation for Health — the nonprofit foundation formed after Blue Cross/Blue Shield's conversion to a for-profit insurance company — sowed the seeds of this agreement with a \$3.5 million challenge grant issued in July. It also provided \$3 million in loan guarantees. The remainder of the money came from local hospitals, other charitable foundations and the city.

Because of the involvement of private groups, it's tempting to view this as a "private sector solution" to the region's health care crisis. But federal money and federal approvals are key to making the idea work. By merging ConnectCare clinics with community health centers, the new affiliation opens the door to higher federal reimbursements and lets clinics get low-priced prescription drugs and low-cost vaccines.

Rep. William "Lacy" Clay, D-St. Louis, helped lay groundwork that led to the plan. Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., played a key role in persuading federal officials to approve the plan. Their continued support, and that of the region's entire congressional delegation, will be vital to its continued success.

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The affiliation does not address the huge health disparities in the region and the state. African-Americans continue to suffer with higher rates of virtually every disease and condition. And no matter how solid the foundation setting up the new affiliation, it cannot insulate clinics and hospitals against future Medicaid cuts that could undermine the entire system.

It may seem odd for one group of politicians to be repairing the health safety net while another rips it apart. But that's the reality of health care for the poor in Missouri — a reality that requires public officials and medical professionals of goodwill to keep to their mending.

Meeting the challenge

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