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John B. Murphy  
Editorial Page Editor

Richard Daniels  
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Chazy Dowaliby  
Editor

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## EDITORIALS HEALTH CARE

# Washington must not abandon community health centers



### COMMENTARY

WILLIAM KEATING

In the fractious political debates in Washington, we must not lose sight of the importance of reinforcing local programs that both affect people's well-being and make fiscal sense – such as, community health centers.

This week is National Community Health Center Week. One of the first community health centers was founded in our own backyard – Dorchester – in 1965 with the goal of increasing access to quality care for everyone, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay.

While I believe that our country needs to get its fiscal house in order, making cuts strictly by the numbers is the wrong approach, especially for programs that are so vital to our nation's health. In the 10th Congressional District, almost 64,000 people received services at community health centers in 2010. Across Massachusetts, the number in 2010 was almost 600,000.

Example abound on how community health centers help our community. There is the case at Manet Community Health Center in Quincy, where a man named John was informed he was at risk of losing his vision from retinopathy – a common side effect of diabetes. He was unaware of this problem because of his hesitation with seeking medical treatment. John had a number of bad experiences with large medical facilities before – from long wait times to lack of individual attention – and eventually went to Manet with a mix

of fear and apprehension.

Manet's medical home team approach was something John had never experienced before. After his visit, he not only had a primary care physician, but a chronic disease nurse manager, diabetes educator and nutritionist. With this integrated health care, John learned how to better manage his condition and he's no longer in immediate danger of losing his eyesight. Most important, John said, "I have never felt more welcome, less afraid, more accepted and more cared for."

Like John, many working families are turning to health centers during the economic downturn. They have lost their health insurance or they only carry catastrophic coverage. Chances are you know someone among the 20 million-plus people now being treated at a community health center.

In our own district, there are numerous health centers that are catering to the needs of our community. Like

Manet, Duffy Health Center in Hyannis embraces a more comprehensive, holistic approach with patients not only receiving medical treatment, but also an array of human services that integrates all aspects of a patient's needs.

Community health centers also provide convenient access for residents who live in more remote areas. Patients living 40 to 50 miles from Cape Cod Hospital and surrounding doctors' offices enjoy the access of Outer Cape Health Services, which now has offices in both Provincetown and Wellfleet. Rather than delaying treatment until they can get a full or half day off from work to make the trek to Hyannis, patients are being more proactive in their care, avoiding protracted, and more expensive, medical conditions.

By ensuring greater equity in health care, America's health centers reduce hospitalizations, emergency room use and referrals to specialists. Also, sev-

eral independent and government studies attest to the outstanding ability of community health centers to diagnose, treat and manage such chronic conditions as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, depression and HIV. These centers reduce our health care costs, which saves all of us money.

We must have viable, vibrant community health centers as part of our health care mix. They're not just keeping people healthier, they're keeping our communities healthier, too, as local employers and economic engines.

Massachusetts has already shown great leadership and resilience in forging the way for health care reform in this country. And we must continue. Protecting our community health centers is a small investment we can and must make to ensure a healthier tomorrow for all of us.

*U.S. Rep. William Keating is a Democrat representing the 10th Congressional District.*