



COMMENTARY

HENRY N. TUTTLE

Health centers worth protecting

Patients receiving their annual check-ups at Manet Community Health Center may be hundreds of miles from the halls of Congress, but how lawmakers decide the future of federal health care spending will likely have an immediate impact on their future.

A "super committee" of 12 members of Congress — includes U.S. Sen. John Kerry — has been tasked with the monumental goal of finding more than a trillion dollars in deficit reduction by Wednesday. As they say in Washington, "everything is on the table" and that includes possible changes to Medicaid.

Thousands of patients who live in South Shore communities we serve are worried about what these changes will mean. They are low-income families, elderly or disabled, and children, many of whom depend on Medicaid as their source of affordable health coverage and Manet Community Health Center for access to primary and preventive health care.

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In Quincy and Hull we have seen first-hand how health centers are an across-the-board win for patients, as well as municipal, state, and federal governments. Community health

centers are recognized as one of the most successful federal health programs ever created, with thousands of studies documenting their quality care, ability to keep costs down and role in creating jobs in economically challenged communities.

Here in Massachusetts, health centers represent the largest primary care network in the state, serving nearly 800,000 people. Equally compelling, Massachusetts health centers care for 30 percent of the state's Medicaid patients at a cost of only 1.3 percent of total state Medicaid spending.

As the states and Congress grapple with how to improve the nation's health care, we are proud of the fact that community health centers remain ahead of the curve, providing a time-tested, comprehensive approach to health care that saves money and improves health. According to a recent study conducted by George Washington University, health centers generate annual savings of \$24 billion (\$1,263 per person) as a result of reducing the rate of preventable hospitalizations, inpatient days, and emergency room use across the health system. They also bring economic benefits to our communities, generating more than 10,000 jobs in Massachusetts and nearly 200,000 across the country.

Disruptive changes to Medicaid, as well as potential cuts to health centers, could not come at a worse time. At Manet Community Health Center, we are already stretching our budget to care for more of the working poor who are struggling to keep their jobs and health insurance, or have already lost one or both. What's more, harmful changes to Medicaid could also increase the costs borne by taxpayers as patients lose health centers as their regular source of primary care and turn to expensive emergency rooms instead.

Likewise, Congress should be wary of deficit-cutting proposals that shift costs and provide more flexibility to states — but also run the risk of weakening the provision of basic medical care for which community health centers were created.

Yes, we must address the growing national debt. But now is the time to be thoughtful about investing our limited resources where they will leverage the most good. We cannot afford to break or endanger what is working well. Manet Community Health Center and health centers across the country are proven local solutions for improving the health of millions of Americans while significantly reducing costs across our health system.

Isn't that the goal in the first place?

Henry N. Tuttle is chief executive officer of Manet Community Health Center in Quincy.