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California and Its Counties Leading Way  
on Health Benefits for Undocumented

Reported/produced by: Tara Siler  
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Text:

California is blazing a new trail by providing hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants with some sort of government health care. It's an expensive proposition, but it also may save money in the long run. As the state with the largest number of undocumented immigrants, California could be a good test to see if the benefits of that effort outweigh the costs. This is a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Tara Siler.

**(Sound of clinic)**

Dr. Teshina Wilson is examining a boy's arm where there's a distinct bite mark. The doctor looks over to the mother and a translator to gather more information.

***(Wilson): "Do we know if the dog is up-to-date on all its vaccines, like rabies shots, everything? ... sabes si perro tiene las vacuñas, la rabia ..."***

This clinic in Richmond, east of San Francisco, serves a lot of immigrants -- with legal papers and without -- and it's about to take on even more. Contra Costa County already provides insurance to undocumented children, and now the county is about to extend primary care services to 3,000 adults living here illegally. It's a one-year pilot program with coverage offered to about 15% of those eligible.

***(Arriaga): "I have asthma, depression and arthritis."***

Rosa Maria Arriaga is 72 years old. She's been in the country for 25 years, and she's determined to sign up for the new program.

***(Arriaga): "The coverage would help me a lot, because I could get my knee treated. The arthritis makes it so I can't walk. My asthma hits at night really hard, and when the depression comes on, I feel like it's better to die."***

Regular primary care might help Arriaga get her health issues under better control. But she says that level of care has been out of reach.

***(Arriaga): "When there's an emergency, I go to a clinic. And each time I go I have to pay \$45. We need medical coverage, so we don't have to pay so much. That's why we're fighting for it."***

Arriaga used to have health insurance through her work, but now that she's unemployed she says she relies more on over-the-counter remedies.

That's typical of this population, says Gerald Kominski, director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

***(Kominski): "When people are uninsured they just postpone care-seeking until it's absolutely necessary, and then it's much more costly."***

Those working for the Contra Costa program are busy setting up systems to track these new patients.

Álvaro Fuentes is director of the county's Community Clinic Consortium that will provide the medical homes for these new patients. He says they hope to show county officials a year from now that preventive care can save money.

***(Fuentes): "If we can start with this small set of individuals and are able to start documenting and in some cases capture the cost savings to the health system, it may promote and motivate additional funding."***

But county supervisor Candice Anderson is not convinced. She voted against the million-dollar program, which is being paid for by the county and by area hospitals.

***(Anderson): "This is a one-year pilot program, and there's no funding sources identified -- a reliable funding source identified -- to make sure it's an ongoing program."***

Contra Costa County used to provide health care coverage to undocumented adults, but cut its program during the 2009 recession. This is a small step toward bringing it back.

Gabrielle Lessard, a health policy attorney with the National Immigration Law Center, says this task now is a bit less daunting, because so many more people are insured under the Affordable Care Act.

***(Lessard): "Now that the number has been whittled down to a more reasonable level, it's something the counties can see tackling. And they understand when one person in a household doesn't have health insurance the entire family is one illness or injury away from financial disaster."***

And an increasing number of California voters seem to support tackling the issue. About 58% of the state's voters, according to a recent Field Poll, believe undocumented people should be eligible for Medi-Cal or a similar program.

***(Wright): "We clearly have policy momentum. We clearly have political momentum."***

Anthony Wright is executive director of Health Access California, a statewide health advocacy group. He notes that 48 of California's 58 counties are now on board to provide some sort of limited low-cost or free health benefits to the undocumented.

***(Wright): "We see the actions by Contra Costa, as well as other counties like Monterey and Sacramento, as county bridges to a statewide solution."***

Wright and his allies recently won a big victory when the state agreed to expand Medi-Cal to cover all undocumented children, beginning next spring. That legislation had included insurance for all undocumented people regardless of age, but was pared down because of cost.

Expense isn't the only issue for Ira Mehlman, with the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates for stricter immigration policies, including in California.

***(Mehlman): "California for a long time has been moving in the direction of accommodating illegal immigration, bending over backwards to provide new services and benefits to people in the country illegally."***

Mehlman says other states are watching what's happening in California – but, he says, it's a limited number of them.

***(Mehlman): "I think if you look at the pattern over the past several years, it is pretty much the same states that are doing things that are similar to what California is doing."***

He means other blue states -- like Washington, Illinois, Massachusetts and New York -- that already provide health coverage to undocumented children. The District of Columbia provides all its residents with public insurance, regardless of their immigration status.

Then there's California, with the largest undocumented population in the nation, at two-and-a-half million. Immigration law advocate Lessard says that makes the Golden State a kind of incubator.

***(Lessard): "Advocacy is going to continue. It will probably be a multi-year effort, but I think eventually people will come to terms with the fact that everyone is just better off when we all have access to care."***

That advocacy will be felt again in the Capitol next year. A bill was introduced in the special legislative session to provide public health insurance to low-income people living here illegally. And it requests a federal waiver so those with more income can purchase private insurance through the state's health exchange.

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at [CHL@CHCF.org](mailto:CHL@CHCF.org).

I'm Tara Siler, thanks for listening.