

POINT OF VIEW

COVID puts long-term health of most vulnerable at risk

Underserved communities and the clinics who care for them have been among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of Palm Beach County residents, many of whom are essential workers, depend on a network of free clinics for basic and critical health needs. These members of our community have been severely impacted by the loss of services and access to care due to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a serious blow to the health of free clinics as well.

Florida's largest free clinic is the Caridad Center, located in Boynton Beach. Caridad has a small number of employees and hundreds of volunteers, including 142 general and specialty physicians. The clinic provides a broad range of services, including medical, dental, mental health and social services. While Caridad has instituted telehealth services and managed a relatively small number of in-person visits, cancellations by many of the volunteer doctors during the pandemic forced the clinic to cancel thousands of appointments and turn away new clients. Case in point, in 2019, Caridad had 16,000 appointments, 1,600 at each of our two clinics each month. That dwindled to 6,000 at each clinic when COVID-19 hit, a drop of 250%.

Why the cancellations? As with most free clinics, Caridad's medical staff consists entirely of volunteers -- many of whom are over 65 and among those at higher risk of complications from COVID. Almost half of the volunteer physicians stopped seeing patients at Caridad while awaiting vaccination. Once vaccines became available, hospital workers were appropriately prioritized. Physicians who work solely in outpatient settings were left out of most vaccination plans and struggled to get immunized. Only now are those physicians eligible and able to receive the vaccine. Many are returning, but it will take months to catch up on appointments.

Although the volunteer physicians will soon be returning to Caridad, the loss of those services due to the

pandemic will be felt for years to come, both in terms of the physical and mental health of thousands of Palm Beach County residents. Lack of access to care can have a devastating impact on short term and long-term health. Loss of access to community health centers and lack of preventive care also add to the burden of our regional hospitals and emergency rooms.

The health of our economically disadvantaged citizens affects all of us beyond the current pandemic – in both human and economic terms.

Like some of the patients it serves, Caridad will suffer immediate and long-term consequences from the pandemic. Much of the financial support for Caridad comes from in-person fund-raising events which have been and will continue to be canceled due to COVID. Cancellation of the clinic's largest fundraiser, the Call to Heart Ball, resulted in a half of a million dollars in lost revenue. Caridad is now scrambling to make up for that loss through other means.

The health of our economically disadvantaged citizens affects all of us beyond the current pandemic – in both human and economic terms. The COVID crisis has highlighted many of the health and economic disparities in our country. Safety-net clinics provide a lifeline to those who need our help the most and serve an important role in the community.

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Editor's Note: Hecht is a Caridad Center board member, volunteer physician and member of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Section XII Committee on Healthcare for Underserved Women.