



Editorial: Health-care needs met at local level

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The general-election results have led to a lot of uncertainties about health care in the United States, but one thing is for sure: Local institutions and community-based collaborative efforts retain crucial roles in the provision of services and any expansion of access to treatment.

The recent Remote Area Medical weekend clinic in Manatee County provided another reminder of how many people lack regular, affordable access to health services, especially dental and vision care.

Some 300 patients waited in line at Manatee Technical College to receive treatment and assessments from RAM, a private-sector charity that was originally created to serve people living in impoverished foreign countries.

RAM was expanded to serve communities in the United States, offering physicians and health-care providers who treat patients at no cost. (More than 1,000 folks sought care during the first RAM event in Manatee County last year.)

The volunteers who have served patients in need deserve immense credit for their willingness to serve individuals and the community.

But there has to be a better way, a method of treating low-income patients or those without health insurance on a regular basis.

Last week, the Sarasota Memorial Health Care System broke ground for a medical office in Newtown, Sarasota's historic black community. The entire program offers benefits on multiple levels.

First and foremost, it will provide much-needed care to adults with chronic health conditions in a neighborhood setting. If it works, the program will not only offer compassionate care but more cost-effective treatment.

The office is the result of several key partnerships. The city of Sarasota provided the site through a low-cost lease. The Florida State University College of Medicine, which has a campus in Sarasota, will be responsible for the care providers through an accredited residency program.

Plans call for 13 residents to join the program during the first three years, for a total of 39. They will be supervised by internal-medicine specialists.

David Verinder, chief executive of Sarasota Memorial — a publicly owned hospital — concisely framed the purpose and benefits of the program. The residencies will offer "an opportunity to bring new physicians into this growing community, and train them here, and most importantly, keep them here. And we wanted to bring health care to where we thought there was a greater need."

Mayor Willie Shaw, whose City Commission district includes Newtown, noted, "That's a wealth of health for all of us." Indeed, it represents the promise of progress in Newtown and enables Sarasota Memorial, a taxpayer-supported hospital, to further fulfill its public-service mission.

The elected Public Hospital Board, which oversees the hospital and associated facilities, moved this week to examine another need — local access to a higher level of cancer care. Hospital officials announced Monday that they have budgeted \$4 million for an initial phase that will focus on site planning and building design.

The purpose is to determine how Sarasota Memorial might become a "premier" cancer-treatment center that provides a complete array of services at a central location. One hope is to build upon the efforts of local specialists who have helped bring cutting-edge services and clinical trials to the community.

Residents of the Sarasota-Manatee region are fortunate to have the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa. Moffitt has the National Cancer Institute's highest ranking as a Comprehensive Cancer Center; its relative proximity has saved patients in our region who seek expert care countless hours and dollars associated with travel.

But in light of coastal Florida's population growth, travel times and demands for services have increased. As a result, the SMH initiative appears warranted as another local response to community needs.