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Q&A: NYC Care Director Outlines Push to Patch Coverage Gaps

By: Shuan Sim

Since the 2019 launch of NYC Care, a health-access program from NYC Health + Hospitals for people ineligible for insurance, it has steadily achieved milestones.

This month it hit 110,000 members. Half the people with diabetes on the program have gotten their blood-sugar level under control, and 40% with hypertension have done the same with their blood pressure.

As the city honored the 18th Immigrant Heritage Week—which ran last Monday through Sunday to commemorate April 17, 1907, the day New York City saw 11,000 immigrants enter the country through Ellis Island—NYC Care launched a campaign for present-day immigrants.

The program, whose budget has grown to \$100 million this fiscal year from \$25 million at launch, is looking to reach communities with non-English-speaking immigrants and rally community-based organizations to run events. The campaign has a budget of \$6 million.

Dr. Jonathan Jimenez, executive director, spoke with *Crain's* on the work his team has cut out for itself in its push to ensure greater access to health services.

What's the size of the undocumented-immigrant community that could benefit from NYC Care?

We've estimated there are about 200,000 people in the city ineligible for health insurance, and we have reached 110,000 members. For the remaining 90,000 or so people, we don't have a sense of how many might be undocumented immigrants, except that they can't access health services through normal insurance means.

It might be that they could access some services through storefront clinics or federally qualified health centers. But we want to ensure that they have consistent access to health care, regardless of immigration status.

What are the challenges for reaching that population?

The biggest challenge for undocumented immigrants accessing health care is overcoming fear. There's still a reluctance to use government services.

We're still too close to the previous presidential administration, which had a rhetoric and policy that persecuted undocumented immigrants. It will take a lot to make sure people know about us.

What solutions are you considering?

We are refreshing our logos and pushing out an ad campaign in the subway and ethnic, non-English media outlets. But it's important we continue to be present in their communities, and we can't do that without our community-based organizations.

There are 22 CBOs we contract with that speak over 30 different languages combined. We coordinate efforts with them on community events, and they in turn provide feedback to us on where we need to be. More than 20% of our enrollment to date has been because of referrals from CBOs.

In this recent push, we will be focusing on a list of 10 city districts with higher rates of uninsured individuals and immigrants. These include Queens Community District 7 and Brooklyn District 7.

[Queens District 7 spans from Flushing to Auburndale. It has nearly 250,000 people, of which 57% are foreign-born. Brooklyn District 7 includes Sunset Park and Windsor Terrace. It has more than 140,000 people, of which 46% are foreign-born.]

Why the renewed outreach to immigrants now?

As part of the New York state budget, there has been expanded access to Medicaid. Part of what NYC Care does is connecting anyone eligible for insurance to it as well. If people are unsure whether they are eligible or not, they can come to us.

[The state health budget did not include the requested \$345 million for the [Coverage for All bill](#), which would extend health coverage to undocumented immigrants who cannot access insurance. Instead, the budget included funding to provide postpartum health coverage for undocumented new mothers for up to one year, as well as health insurance for undocumented immigrants older than 65.]

We are having regular conversations with our CBO partners to make sure they can advocate about the new eligibility criteria. The state budget has brought changes to how we talk about our program system-wide, along with the 400 staff members who do health insurance enrollment at NYC Health + Hospitals.

Covid had been rough on all of us already. We want immigrants to know about us, but also to know they have a right to health care.