

Lawmakers back Westside, health care (The News Journal)

Congress weighs increase in funding for community 'safety nets'

By GARY HABER

The News Journal

August 14, 2008

Two members of Delaware's congressional delegation visited Westside Family Healthcare's medical office on East 16th Street on Wednesday to voice their support for legislation to increase funding for Westside and the nation's 1,200 other community health centers.

U.S. Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., and U.S. Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., are longtime backers of the federally supported community health centers, which treat patients who might otherwise go without medical care.

These centers have assumed increasing importance as a safety net, as the ranks of the uninsured continue to grow. About 47 million Americans, including about 106,000 Delawareans, lack health insurance, and their numbers are increasing as more employers stop offering coverage and the spiraling cost puts it beyond the reach of many of those whose employers do offer coverage.

"We keep people out of the emergency rooms and we keep people out of the hospital," said Susan Walter, associate director for the National Association of Community Health Centers, who attended Wednesday's event.

Carper, along with U.S. Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., was among 74 Senate co-sponsors of the Health Care Safety Net Act of 2008. The bill, which was passed by the Senate on July 21, authorizes \$10.3 billion in funding for community health centers through 2012.

Castle was one of 249 sponsors of a companion bill in the House that would authorize \$11.4 billion in funding. That bill, the Health Centers Renewal Act of 2008, passed the House on June 4. Both bills received broad bipartisan support from both Democrats and Republicans.

"I'm a total believer, and it may be because here in Delaware these health centers work extremely well," Castle said.

A House-Senate conference committee will hash out the differences between the two bills before sending the legislation to President Bush, who has generally been a supporter of the community health centers.

Increased funding is important for Westside, one of four federally funded health centers in Delaware, said Lolita Lopez, its president and chief executive officer.

Westside, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, treated more than 17,000 patients in 2007 at three medical offices in New Castle County. That is about a four-fold increase from 2000.

Westside also is among the state's busiest obstetrics practices, delivering 658 babies last year.

About 51 percent of Westside's patients lack health insurance, a sharp increase from 39 percent just a year ago, Lopez said.

The remainder are covered by government-funded insurance programs such as Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program. A small percentage have private health insurance.

To keep up with the demand, Westside is looking to add three to four more physicians to its staff of 18 doctors over the next year, said Dr. Christine Donohue-Henry, Westside's medical director.

The nation's 1,200 community health centers need about 3,200 additional physicians and other health care professionals just to treat the 18 million patients these centers now see, said Walter, of the health centers association.