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# Health care burden along border said too much for public sector

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EL PASO — The health care burden along the U.S.-Mexico border is too great for the public sector to bear alone, according to the administrator of a large Rio Grande Valley community and migrant health center.

Frank Vasquez, executive director of the Hidalgo County Health Care Corporation (HCHC), says private philanthropies must share more of the load with government.

Speaking at an El Paso conference on health and mental health issues along the border, Vasquez urged private sources to "provide critically needed resources to address the tremendous health problems along our border."

The conference attracted health care providers from Brownsville to San Diego, including some from Mexico. It was hosted by Grantmakers in Health and the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.

Participants included representatives of several prominent private foundations and officials of different health study groups, including the United States/Mexico Border Health Association and Mexico's Ministry of Health.

Vasquez told the conference that one of the most serious challenges facing federal and state supported community health centers such as HCHC is a steady surge in the number of people seeking services. At the same time, he said it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain doctors and nurses.

"We are overwhelmed daily with uninsured patients far exceeding our capacity to care for them," he said. "We face an ever-increasing number of new patients, in particular the new poor and those with HIV/AIDS, who see us as the only source of care left to them."

He cited a recent study that showed an "unsatisfied demand" for 326,000 doctor-patient encounters in 1989. To serve that unmet need, HCHC would need approximately 65 additional physicians at its clinics in Pharr, Mission, Edcouch and Mercedes.

The medical and dental staff presently includes 11 physicians, three dentists, one nurse practitioner, two dental hygienists, 17 nurses and three dental assistants. They provided comprehensive primary care to 19,789 different patients in 1989, who averaged 280 medical and dental office visits daily.

"Thirty-eight percent of our current users are children, but we have only one pediatrician on staff," said Vasquez, a member of the national advisory committee of the Health Care for Hispanic Individuals project being conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

He cited Texas Employment Commission estimates of 39 percent poverty in Hidalgo County and unemployment rates of 15 percent and higher without let up. He said 90 percent of HCHC's patients have no medical or health insurance, and their only other source of care would be hospital emergency rooms.

"With the need to remain in the black, local hospitals are increasingly reluctant to admit indigent patients who are not covered by Medicaid unless they are seriously ill," Vasquez told the conference. "Only 14 percent of the total county population is covered by Medicaid, and 73 percent are uninsured."

He pointed out that Hidalgo County is home for approximately 208,000 farmworkers — 117,000 migrant and 91,000 seasonal — which is about 40 percent of all farmworkers in Texas. Thirty percent of HCHC's patients are farmworkers.

Even though farmworkers make important contributions to society, Vasquez noted their poverty, exposure to hazardous pesticides and other dangerous working conditions impose serious health risks.

"The rates of acute infections and chronic diseases in these groups are far above the national average," he told conference participants.

Unsanitary colonias also contribute heavily to health problems, he added. Of the 546 colonias in the 16 Texas border area counties, 366 are in Hidalgo County.

Many of the county's approximately 51,800 colonia residents live in crowded housing with inadequate plumbing and no potable water, he said, some with no electricity.

"The presence of so many colonia residents ... who live in these unsanitary conditions gives rise to 'third world' diseases which stem from contaminated water and lack of sewage facilities," Vasquez said.

# Health care

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The high cost of health care has not bypassed the community clinic. Although HCHC has not paid a single malpractice claim in its 18-year history, records show the cost of its malpractice insurance has tripled in the past four years.

Yet, Vasquez said, the center has provided primary health care services to thousands who otherwise would have gone without care until they were seriously ill. This has resulted in a healthier and more productive community as a whole, he added.

"I believe we at HCHC have done an outstanding job of meeting the health care needs of the neediest in our community," Vasquez said, "with *dignidad* and *respecto*."

He pointed out it is also done efficiently, at a cost of \$215 per patient annually, compared with current national average expenditures of just under \$600 for the same services.

Payment for services is discounted or adjusted based on the patient's ability to pay and size of family, so patients can receive medical and dental care at affordable costs.

Vasquez cited an urgency for more physicians, dentists and mental health providers to meet the health care needs along the border; more clinics staffed with qualified health professionals to be the points for accessing that care; and means of coordinating and managing the patient's care through other providers.

Vasquez recommended that anyone interested in improving the health of the border region should focus on where the needy will go for care.

The "perfect model" for such a system, he said, would be health centers such as HCHC that are located all along the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Community and migrant health centers can serve as an important model for an effective, affordable solution to this most pressing problem," Vasquez said.