Exploring ways to expand health care

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Even though major provisions of the Affordable Care Act — also known as health care reform — won't kick in until 2014, Santa Cruz County groups already are working together to make sure we're ready. One of the challenges will be providing access to health care for the approximately 40,000 uninsured Santa Cruz County residents who will gain health insurance coverage. That's a lot of people to accommodate in a system that doesn't have a lot of extra capacity.

To help prepare for the changes, the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County secured grant funding from the Blue Shield California Foundation to bring experts from the University of California at San Francisco to Santa Cruz County to share a model of team-based care. One UCSF approach to increasing capacity is using the skills of medical assistants more effectively within health care teams.

Cabrillo College, whose medical assistant program offers a variety of clinical and non-clinical degree and certificate options, is a key partner in making this training more widely available locally.

Claire Laughlin is director of Cabrillo's Corporate Training Program and shared her thoughts about the potential of this UCSF model for Santa Cruz County.

What is team-based care?

Team-based care is designed to improve the quality of health care for patients by improving communication and coordination across a team of providers and developing strong relationships between the team and patients. Instead of physicians, nurses, Medical Assistants, and others each doing their own thing — and sometimes not aware of each other's roles and contributions — team-based care looks for specific ways to align all the members of a team around a common purpose, which is caring for their patient. When team members aren't communicating and coordinating well, lots of things fall through the cracks, and people's talents aren't used as effectively as they could be.

What kind of team-based training will be available in Santa Cruz?

The UCSF curriculum, which we'll be offering here in Santa Cruz County through Cabrillo Extension courses, jump-starts the teamwork by training team members together. The UCSF team will be here in the spring to share their approach with local health care providers and leaders, including not just physicians and Medical Assistants but also office managers who have a lot of influence over how health care is organized and delivered in different settings. Faculty from Cabrillo's Medical Assistant program will be trained by the UCSF experts, and then will be able to offer the training more broadly to local teams through Cabrillo Extension courses in the fall.

What kinds of changes and results do you hope to see?

It's clear that all over the country — not just in Santa Cruz County — there are just not going to be enough primary care physicians to meet the demand, especially as health care reform expands the number of people with health insurance. We really need to find ways to increase primary care capacity. Working more efficiently as a team is a better use of scarce health care resources, and also has the potential to improve patients' experiences and their health outcomes. By offering this training locally, we hope to keep Santa Cruz County ahead of the curve, innovating our way to a better health care system that serves the needs of both patients and providers.

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