

Securing specialty care for uninsured patients / Access Now arranges free, donated services in Richmond area

**By Tammie Smith**

Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

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Orthopedic surgeon Anthony Shaia has taken care of uninsured patients, but it has been a challenge at times to arrange other services the patient needed after surgery.

After hip surgery, for instance, a patient would need crutches and an elevated toilet seat. The patient might also need a hospital bed and home health care.

"We'd take care of them, but we can't get them medication," said Shaia, who practices with West End Orthopedic Clinic. "Or we'd take care of them, but we can't get them a brace.

"Before we had to call around and scrounge and beg and see if someone would be willing to do it," Shaia said.

Since this year, a program called Access Now has brought all those components together. Access Now, based at the Richmond Academy of Medicine, links uninsured patients of free clinics and other "safety-net" providers with medical specialists who have agreed to donate a certain amount of free care.

For the free clinics and other safety-net providers, it eliminates the need to make call after call trying to get a specialist to see an uninsured patient. For the medical specialists, it provides some assurance the patients sent to them have been financially screened for eligibility and that the patients will have access to things such as medications and medical equipment.

For the uninsured patients, the program streamlines access to specialists and related services.

More than 500 medical specialists are participating in Access Now, said Deborah Love of the Richmond Academy of Medicine.

"Some commit to see two patients per month," Love said. "Some practices, depending on the specialty, see five. It varies depending on the size of the practice and the area of specialty."

The program formalizes what had been an informal referral network that had a small number of community medical specialists carrying a big share of the charity care load, said Dr. Carolyn Thomas, who serves on the Access Now advisory board.

"Certain physicians or certain groups of physicians were getting most of the calls because of personal relationships they may have with the director or physicians attending certain of the clinics," Thomas said.

Love said more than 25 medical specialty areas are represented. Not included are specialists in obstetrics, psychiatry and mental health, pediatrics and pain management, Love said.

The program had been several years in the making. The organization REACH - Richmond Enhancing Access to Community Healthcare - helped start the conversation between the free clinics and the Richmond Academy of Medicine.

Since January, the program has referred 150 to 160 patients, Love said. The average patient has been a female in her early 40s. Most patients have been employed. Orthopedic care has been a big need.

"We think by the end of the year we will be able to document somewhere between \$1 million and \$1.2 million worth of services," Love said.

The project is modeled after a similar program started by a medical society in Buncombe County, N.C., about a decade ago. Since then, similar programs have been initiated by other medical societies in other communities.

Access Now, said Sheryl Garland of the Virginia Commonwealth University Health System, "is important for our community because we are going to have to figure out some innovative ways of taking care of the growing number of uninsured.

"Some of the safety-net providers do refer to VCU. I don't expect that to change. There are some services we provide that are not part of the Access Now network."

VCU operates a program called Virginia Coordinated Care that assigns uninsured people who come to VCU to community-based providers for primary care. Those community providers can refer the patients to specialists at VCU.

Contact Tammie Smith at (804) 649-6572 or [TLsmith@timesdispatch.com](mailto:TLsmith@timesdispatch.com).

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