

## HEALTH CARE SOLUTIONS

# Access Now

The American health care system is confusing, complex, and expensive. Debates about fixing it are often heated and highly politicized.

So it's exciting to hear about a program in Richmond that cuts through the controversy and costs to achieve real results for some of our region's most vulnerable: low-income families and individuals who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to pay the high cost of health insurance.

Access Now brings together patients, doctors, clinics, and hospitals. It is a remarkably low-cost enterprise that helps the uninsured receive timely care from specialists and hospitals. The program is a model of elegant common sense. Richmond is blessed with hundreds of specialists willing to donate their time and talent to treat patients unable to afford the expensive procedures and medications they need to stay healthy. Access Now has created a system that ensures patients in need can find doctors willing to help. Its low cost, by the way, results largely from health professionals' willingness to volunteer what will soon add up to millions of dollars' worth of "free" care.

The program was launched in January by the Richmond Academy of Medicine and Richmond Enhancing Access to Community Healthcare. It is fueled by an extraordinary coalition of health care professionals: more than 550 specialty physicians, 14 free clinics and public health departments, and all three of the region's major hospital operators: VCU, HCA, and Bon Secours. The cooperation speaks well of the local health care community.

"Doctors are willing to care for these uninsured patients without charge, and the patients certainly need the care," said Dr. Anthony Shaia, a surgeon at West End Orthopedic Clinic. "With this program, we'll be able to funnel those patients in need to the doctors who are willing to see them." That's the real genius of Access Now. It takes resources — and professional commitment — already in place and figures out how to make them work better.

The greatest gain will be healthier lives for hundreds, and eventually thousands. But there also are bottom-line benefits. Fewer uninsured patients will neglect their own health care, only to clog expensive emergency rooms once their conditions deteriorate so severely that they can't be ignored.

"Access Now is focused on providing access to specialists to patients in the free clinics," said Patrick Farrell, president of HCA's Richmond division. "In the past, if those physicians weren't available, patients would present in the E.R. That is not an efficient way to provide care, and sometimes results in the patient getting care later in the process."

Access Now won't solve all the problems facing the region's health care system. But it demonstrates how much can be accomplished by people filled with compassion, determination, and ingenuity. Richmond should be proud — and supportive.