Innovative Medicaid Waiver Project Brings Health Services to Hundreds

Armando Saldivar
Senior Public Affairs Officer

It started out as a way to combine the resources of two City of El Paso departments in order to provide essential services to our senior population, and has now become a model project that is one of a kind in the nation. The Vaccinations for Health program is a cooperative endeavor between the City of El Paso Department of Public Health and the El Paso Fire Department. It officially began late last year with Fire paramedics administering flu shots, pneumonia vaccines, and basic health screenings to seniors 50 years of age and older who are on Medicaid or who are uninsured.

“We looked to the Fire Department because by the nature of the job they are well trusted in the community and fire stations are located in neighborhoods throughout the city,” said Robert Resendes, Public Health Director. “These services are critical for this population and the Department of Public Health is always looking to fill the gaps that may exist in El Paso and Hudspeth County because of lack of insurance or ability to pay.”

So far, nearly 600 patients have been seen since the start of the program less than six months ago.

"This program has been very rewarding; we have helped so many residents in need. We hope as the word continues to get out, we will see more and more seniors coming our way," said Robert Arvizu, Deputy Fire Chief. "We thank all our media partners for informing the public of this unique service."

In addition to the vaccines and health assessments, the program also offers colorectal screening kits, which clients take home with them and return via mail.

“Most seniors who have a primary care physician will be tested for colorectal cancer every two years as a part of a regular checkup,” said Claudia Lozano, Project Coordinator. “If it wasn’t for this program I am sure there would be hundreds of area seniors who would never get checked for this disease.”

In fact, colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer killer in the United States, second only to lung cancer. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), if everyone 50 years or older had regular screening tests, at least 60% of deaths from this particular cancer could be averted.

"This is a great program," said Arturo Gonzales, 93, who recently received services. "Generally there isn’t a place we can get these types of vaccinations easily. Hopefully they continue."

All services are provided free of charge thanks to funding provided under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act. It allows states the opportunity to redesign the delivery of Medicaid services through a five-year waiver of certain Medicaid funding conditions. Texas’ waiver program will finance community projects to improve health care quality and lower cost.

“Our health department is eligible for up to 5% of the local waiver funding. And while that might not seem like a lot to work with, that 5% is about $14,000,000,” said Bruce Parsons, Assistant Health Director. “That makes this the largest infusion of non-property tax revenue in the history of the department.”

The City of El Paso Department of Public Health is also using the Medicaid waiver receipts to expand preventive health services beyond the Vaccinations for Health program. The department is currently collaborating with community partners in various areas which include: the Border Public Health Interest Group for Research on Health Disparities, the Community Health Atlas, a Mobile Dental Clinic, and a Health Information Exchange.

For more information residents can call 311 or visit www.ephealth.com.

Armando Saldivar, Senior Public Affairs Officer, City of El Paso Department of Public Health.