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Evolving health programs improved access, quality of care

By Kevin Mattson & Gary Rotto | 5:30 p.m. July 29, 2015

On July 30, 1965, President Johnson signed legislation establishing Medicare for the elderly and Medicaid (Medi-Cal) for low-income adults, children, pregnant women and people with disabilities. Though Medicare and Medicaid started as basic health coverage programs for Americans, the programs have evolved over the years to provide improved access to quality and affordable health care coverage. These programs have transformed the delivery of health care in the United States.

We've come to recognize Medicaid saves lives, helps people live longer and provides the peace of mind that comes with affordable health care. Today Medicaid provides comprehensive coverage to more than 70 million eligible children, pregnant women, low-income adults and people living with disabilities. Medi-Cal serves more than 11 million people, nearly one out of three residents and covers essential services like annual checkups, care for new and expecting mothers and dental care for kids from low-income families. The number is growing. According to Covered California, Medi-Cal numbers increased by 2.2 million enrollees in the first six months of 2014.

Our colleague, Irma Cota, president and CEO of North County Health Services, recently emphasized that the history of Medicaid is intertwined with the history of community health centers. She noted that community health centers were early adopters of Medicaid and welcomed Medicaid patients when other sectors did not. Today, community health centers continue to provide the majority of care to Medi-Cal recipients. Hospitals and private-sector medical groups acknowledge the role these centers play and the high quality of medical services provided. In 2013, the last year for which we have regional statistics, the 16 Council of Community Clinic member health centers operating more than 100 sites in San Diego, Riverside and Imperial counties, provided services to more than 309,000 patients covered by Medi-Cal, approximately 44.7 percent of total number of patients seen in the health centers. Like California at large, this number has increased significantly in the past two years. We know from February 2015 data provided by the County of San Diego that more than 650,000 San Diegans depend on Medi-Cal for their health coverage.

The key truth is a constant: every day people face medical challenges – sometimes serious ones. Often it happens when we least expect it. In the absence of Medicaid, our most vulnerable would have no access to affordable health care. Those with disabilities or suffering from chronic illnesses; pregnant women, and children needing medical and dental care, would be inundating our already overburdened emergency departments or merely going without medical services.

Medicaid saves lives and increases the health care stability of our communities. Half of the babies born in this country had their births covered by Medicaid. The program fills the gaps in health coverage that frequently occur in people's lives and helps them transition through life events that would otherwise leave them uninsured. And that is the key: Medicaid allows people to transition through very difficult times in their lives. What many people don't know is that the majority of adults with Medicaid are employed and pay taxes, but work in low-wage jobs for small firms or service industries that typically don't offer health insurance.

Medicaid does more than just pay the bills. It has been a remarkable source of innovation in American health care. State Medicaid directors developed a model of home and community-based care that makes independent living possible for people who might otherwise be institutionalized.

Without support from Medicaid, many rural hospitals would be in danger of closing, leaving all members of the community underserved.

Last, Medicaid is a model of efficiency. Coverage for an adult costs an average of \$5,671 a year, 20 percent less than the cost of private coverage. Medicaid also gives states enormous flexibility in whom they cover, what benefits they provide and how they deliver health care services. Using federal waivers, states can experiment with new approaches that often lead to changes adopted by the entire country.

For 50 years, Medicaid has been and should always be a constant, reflecting our values as a country to always make a lifeline available when society's most vulnerable need it.

Mattson, president and CEO of San Ysidro Health Center, is chairman of the board of the Council of Community Clinics. Rotto is the director of health policy of the Council of Community Clinics.