

Community Health Centers

Overview

In America, over 25 million people receive their health care at community health centers. Almost 1 million Virginians have no health insurance.

For many people, there are barriers to using private doctor's offices for their primary care. Some of these barriers include:

- No insurance
- No transportation,
- No one to translate language,
- No physician's office located nearby, and
- Very limited financial resources.

Community health centers may serve:

- People with low-incomes,
- People who are homeless,
- Migrant farm workers,
- People who live in isolated rural areas,
- Frail older adults, or
- People without health insurance.

Activities & Services

Community health centers provide primary care services and focus on prevention and wellness as much as they do treatment. According to the [National Association for Community Health Centers](#), community-based health center services, generally include:

- Primary care visits,
- Health education,
- Disease screening and control,
- Case management,

- Laboratory service,
- Dental care,
- Pharmacy services,
- Substance abuse counseling, and
- Social services.

Because these health centers reach out to people who need non-traditional access to care, they provide services in non-traditional ways including:

- Evening hours,
- Weekend hours,
- Mobile units,
- Multi-lingual staff, and
- Transportation to appointments.

Types of Community Health Centers

A common characteristic of community health centers and free clinics is the provision of health care for people who cannot access the traditional health care system. There are four types of health centers that receive federal funding and qualify for the designation, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC). This designation means that these clinics have met strict federal guidelines relating to quality of care and cost control.

The several kinds of Federally Qualified Health Centers are:

Community Health Centers (CHC) are always located in medically underserved areas and offer these core services:

- Physician care,
- X-rays,
- Laboratory work,
- Prevention services,
- Immunizations,
- Transportation for health services,
- Case management and
- Specialty referrals.

Migrant Health Centers (MHCs) serve migrant and seasonal farm workers and offer these core services:

- Primary care services,
- Preventive health care,
- Transportation,
- Outreach,
- Dental,
- Pharmaceutical and
- Environmental services.

Migrant Health Centers often use lay outreach workers and bilingual, bicultural health personnel to provide services.

Health Care for the Homeless programs (HCH) serve people who are homeless. Health Care for the Homeless programs purpose is to coordinate services with other health care providers in the community, utilizing a multidisciplinary approach to providing services for people who are homeless. Health Care for the Homeless programs typically provide:

- Street outreach,
- Primary care services,
- Substance abuse counseling,
- Mental health counseling,
- Case management, and
- Client advocacy.

Public Housing Primary Care programs serve residents of public housing.

Other community clinics offering services similar to those provide by Federally Qualified Health Centers, include health departments, free clinics, rural health clinics, and additional community-based providers.

Licensure & Certification

To assure the quality of health care they provide, they undergo an evaluation called the Primary Care Effectiveness Review. There is no licensing requirement by the state specific to community health centers, though all community health center physicians are either board certified or board eligible and licensed by the State.

However, community health centers nationwide are in the process of seeking accreditation from The Joint Commission.

Cost & Coverage

Community Health Centers are not always free and often offer services on a sliding fee scale that is based on income. Federally qualified health centers all accept Medicare and Medicaid. Community Health Centers accept all patients, regardless of their ability to pay.

Beyond Community Health Centers -- Free Clinics

Virginia also is home to many Free Clinics. These entities serve individuals who are uninsured and cannot afford to pay for health care. Typically, free clinics are staffed by a handful of paid employees, with a significant amount of the care provided by volunteer physicians, dentists, nurses, and other medical and healthcare professionals. For more information on Virginia Free Clinics, including a list of all Free Clinics statewide, contact the [Virginia Association of Free and Charitable Clinics](#).

More Information

The [Virginia Community Healthcare Association](#) is a non-profit organization that works to provide affordable, proper care to all Virginians. The Virginia Community Healthcare Association can provide you with additional information about accessing primary care in Virginia.

The [Virginia Health Care Foundation](#) is a public/private partnership that works to improve access to primary care for Virginia's uninsured and medically underserved.

The [National Association of Community Health Centers](#) is the professional association of local community health centers, migrant health centers, health care for the homeless programs, and public housing primary care programs.

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