

Area residents healthy, but more uninsured

Community Research Council releases its report on the status of health care

BY EMILY BERRY

STAFF WRITER

Most Hamilton County residents polled in a recent survey said they are in excellent or very good health, but one in five said they had been without health insurance sometime in the last 12 months.

The findings were part of a local health care report issued Thursday by the Community Research Council, a nonprofit group that is compiling a larger report to address a list of quality-of-life issues in Hamilton County.

"The idea of the State of Chattanooga Region Report is that policy makers both in government and outside of government are better positioned to act based on data rather than just intuition," council Director David Eichenthal said.

The findings were gathered from an April phone survey of 1,000 Hamilton County residents. The report found:

■ People in households with an income of less than \$50,000 were about three times more likely to report being in fair or poor health than were those

WHAT'S NEXT

The Community Research Council will release its full State of Chattanooga Region report in September.

with higher incomes. Those who had graduated from college were more likely to report themselves as in excellent or very good health.

■ The number of people who reported being without health insurance at some point over the last 12 months rose to 20 percent compared to 13 percent in a survey last year, the report stated.

■ Blacks, people with household incomes less than \$50,000, and those without a college degree were more likely to have been uninsured over the past year.

■ Those who reported being in fair or poor health were more than twice as likely to have been without insurance over the last 12 months.

Mr. Eichenthal said it would be up to others to act on the findings.

"We're not in a position

where we're prescribing, but as in medicine, unless you diagnose the right problem, it's hard to find to find the right remedy," he said.

Dr. Mark Brzezienski, president of the Chattanooga & Hamilton County Medical Society, said the report's findings were consistent with what he and his colleagues have seen over the past year, since people first began losing coverage under TennCare because of a state reform program.

As is reflected in the report, he said, the poor, less educated and minority populations tend to go without primary care, and their health suffers.

"They're more likely to present with advanced states of disease or be sicker when they are seen," Dr. Brzezienski said.

He and other area physicians are attempting to reach out to the uninsured through programs such as Project Access, the medical society's program that arranges care from medical specialists for the poor and uninsured.

"I think as a general rule, as the cost of health care goes up, you're going to see more peo-

ple who with their disposable income, they can't afford the premiums," said Paula Register, CEO of Mountain Management, a division of Memorial Health Care system that oversees Memorial Hospital's primary care clinics.

She said the clinics had seen a rise in uninsured patients over the last year. Health care providers can help the uninsured by continuing to offer clinic services and by increasing the number of public health screenings available, she said.

Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey could not be reached Thursday for comment.

Bill Ulmer, director of community health services at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Health Department, said health department officials needed to review the full report before commenting on its findings.

Erlanger CEO Jim Brexler deferred comment until he had more time to review the report, hospital spokeswoman Nancy White said.

E-mail Emily Berry at eberry@timesfreepress.com