

Washington Health Centers Get Federal Cash Infusion

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - Eleven Community Health Centers around the state will share a total of about \$18 million as part of the Affordable Care Act, to expand and renovate their facilities.

The federal money is part of a plan to double the capacity of the nation's Community Health Center system by 2015.

Patrick Bucknum, who heads Columbia Valley Community Health in Wenatchee, says the money will allow the clinic to expand the consulting and waiting areas, and to move a pharmacy - which it outgrew long ago - out of the basement.

We have a lot of patients that have mobility issues, and so getting to the current pharmacy in the basement, it's a maze to get there, so - it's hard to explain. It's common for them to be lost in the labyrinth - and so, this will make it accessible, right off the main entrance. - Patrick Bucknum

Community Health Centers serve patients regardless of their ability to pay. Tom Van Coverden, who heads the National Association of Community Health Centers, says lawmakers know the system is jammed, and the effort has bipartisan support.

"I think policymakers on both sides realize even if you're fortunate enough to have a insurance card, you need a place to go - and if there's a medical home, a place that really is helping them to stay healthy, that there would be a long-range benefit in cost savings for everybody."

Bucknum says his facility has seen increases of 5 percent to 7 percent per year in the number of patients they see.

"A little over 80 percent of our patients are what we consider an underserved population, and 92 percent of our patients are below 200 percent of the poverty level. And so for them, access to affordable medications is a priority."

Nationwide, the money will fund almost 400 construction and remodeling projects during the next two years.

A list of grantees by state and more information about the program is online at hhs.gov.

- Chris Thomas