

NEWS RELEASE

Statewide Coalition Receives Grants to Expand Health Care Access to Small Business

AUSTIN--The Texas Communities Healthcare Coalition (TCHC) has received two grants totaling \$1.3 million to expand health care access to small businesses and their employees in 2009. The grants from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and Texas Department of Insurance (TDI) will support the development of health care coverage programs for small employers throughout Texas.

HHSC grant funds will fund the necessary technical assistance to Dallas and El Paso counties so they can offer multi-share health care coverage by June 2009. Additionally, the grant funds will accelerate multi-share plan development in Harris and Galveston counties, as well as various counties in Central Texas, so that health care coverage can be offered by January 2009. Multi share or three-share plans are low-cost, subsidized health care programs for low-wage employees of small employers who have not provided health insurance to their employees for a six to 12 month period. These programs provide the employees with medical homes. Initially this will be accomplished through three-share or multi-share plans in which contributions from the employer, employees, and public funds finance the health care programs.

Dallas County Commissioner Maurine Dickey, who has advocated expanded health care programs for small employers for several years, said "A three-share plan was not contemplated in the beginning. However, the need for this type of coverage took on a life of its own, not only in Dallas, but also in five other communities across the state."

The TDI grant will support designing and implementing multi-share programs in each of the aforementioned communities to ensure access to health care coverage for the uninsured among employees of small businesses and non-profit organizations.

"By funding the development of health care coverage programs for the working uninsured of small employers, TDI is promoting economic development and workforce sustainability statewide," said Don Spies, Executive Director of the North Texas 3-Share Plan. "We still have a long way to go to make this a reality, but there is enthusiasm among many professionals in Dallas County for this kind of program."

Texas has the highest percentage of uninsured residents in the nation. Two-thirds of the uninsured are working adults who lack access to health coverage or cannot afford it, and a disproportionate number work for small employers.

The first 3-Share Plan to be offered is in Galveston County. This program, which is currently enrolling members, will provide employees with preventive care and hospitalization through the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) network. The Galveston 3-Share Plan will begin coverage July 1. This two-year pilot program is funded in part by a grant from Houston Endowment.

"We are very pleased with the response of the small business community to the 3 Share Plan in Galveston County," said Barbara Breier, PhD, Assistant Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at UTMB. "We anticipate having 500 employees enrolled by September 1. The Galveston County 3 Share plan will help encourage other communities to consider this option as one means of providing affordable health care to the working uninsured."

TCHC is a voluntary association of communities collaborating to identify statewide options to reduce the number of uninsured individuals in their communities while preserving local and regional flexibility. Six communities currently participate in the coalition: Houston (Harris County), Central Texas (Travis, Hays, Williamson, Burnet, Caldwell, and Bastrop Counties), Galveston (Galveston County), El Paso (El Paso County), North Texas (Dallas County) and San Antonio (Bexar County). As a voluntary association, the coalition is open to other communities with shared goals and a willingness to work toward developing market-based solutions to the uninsurance crisis, and to improving health outcomes.