

Mayor Newsom Proposes Universal Health Care

Mayor's plan would provide health care for all uninsured San Franciscans

San Francisco , CA – Fulfilling a pledge he made in last October's State of the City to create universal health care access, Mayor Newsom yesterday unveiled a first-in-the-nation model to provide low-cost health care to all uninsured City residents. The plan would emphasize primary and preventative care and protect its members from financial ruin in the event of a health care crisis.

Due to increasing health insurance costs, it is estimated that some 85,000 San Franciscans do not have access to primary or specialty health care. As a result, many uninsured San Franciscans access health care through emergency rooms. While federal law mandates that all emergency departments must treat patients regardless of their ability to pay, these visits often result in enormous bills. In fact, over half of all bankruptcies in U.S. involve medical bills. What's more, hospital emergency rooms have no clear place to send these patients for follow-up.

Mayor Gavin Newsom called the health care plan "a real solution to our health care crisis." The mayor said, "This program ensures that San Franciscans who can't afford insurance can finally afford health care. By guaranteeing access, primary care and prevention, we will dramatically improve the health of all San Franciscans." The mayor continued saying, "This plan represents an order of magnitude change in our approach to providing health care."

"The San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium supports the Mayor's proposal to expand health care access for the city's uninsured residents, said John Gressman, President/CEO San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium, "Access to preventive and primary care helps people maintain their health and prevents unnecessary emergency room visits and hospitalizations. SFCC and its 10 partner and community health centers are excited about being part of the health care solution for uninsured San Franciscans."

The San Francisco Health Plan (SFHP), the city-sponsored agency plan that already administers benefits to 50,000 poor San Franciscans, would run the new program. Jean Fraser, SFHP's CEO, said "We're very proud of the fact that San Francisco has universal health insurance for children through the Healthy Kids & Young Adults program. But it's not realistic to pay for commercial health insurance for 80,000 adults. I applaud the Mayor for taking a fresh approach. He's focusing on what really matters – that San Franciscans have access to affordable health care so that no one faces financial ruin for getting sick."

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Plan members would access care through the existing 20 public and nonprofit community health clinics and secondary care would be provided at SF General Hospital. Utilizing savings from increased efficiencies similar to those found at the Tom Waddell clinic last year that increased patient visits by over 30%, the Mayor's plan would significantly expand clinic capacity. As part of the plan, the Mayor has also called for extended clinic hours on weekends and evenings to meet increased capacity – something that the Department of Public Health is budgeting for in the coming fiscal year.

Additionally, members would receive a health plan card and be assigned a “medical home,” which will serve as their entry point to the health care system and also provide a primary care provider. In an important innovation, the Mayor's plan would ensure that members' medical records are available for reference no matter where they are being treated within the City system.

Mayor Newsom is currently in the process of forming a Health Access Council that will bring together health care and insurance experts, hospital and clinic providers, local employers, labor, community and non-profit leaders, and City policy makers to determine the remaining details most notably cost per individual member. The Mayor is currently in dialogue with Supervisor Tom Ammiano to ensure broad representation on the council. The Health Access Council has been given a 100 day mandate to finalize the program.

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