



## University Hospitals' bills don't explain that financial help may be available to those who make more than poverty guidelines

Posted by [Sarah Jane Tribble](#) / Plain Dealer Reporter July 31, 2009 21:00PM

When [University Hospitals](#) changed its charity-care policy late last year to allow families with higher incomes to qualify for free treatment, it did so quietly.

Under the new policy, a family of four that earns up to \$88,200 but does not have health insurance qualifies for some assistance. A generous level, according to consumer advocates -- but not helpful if families aren't aware of it.

"It's great to have a good policy, but if patients don't know about it, obviously that doesn't do any good," said Carol Pryor, policy director at the [Access Project](#), a Boston-based health-care advocacy group. "Patients should be able to apply for charity care first, before there is pressure for other kinds of payment."

UH, which operates a main campus in University Circle as well as 25 community hospitals and health centers in Northeast Ohio, provides an application for charity care on the back of each bill but fails to explain who might qualify. The nonprofit hospital system also makes no mention of a medical indigent program introduced in January that provides further assistance for those with insurance but who cannot pay their bills.

In contrast, the nonprofit [Cleveland Clinic](#) -- a regional rival that provides a similar sliding scale of financial assistance for the same income levels -- provides a chart on the back of every bill stating what a family can earn and still qualify for help.

Another key difference, as stated on the back of its bill, is that the Clinic provides charity care for those with insurance and exceptional circumstances. UH's bill does not state whether it provides charity care for patients with insurance.

"Our charity policy is generally for patients that are uninsured," said Connie Smith, a manager of customer service at the health system.

When asked by The Plain Dealer in an interview last week why University Hospitals did not show qualifying income levels on its bills, Smith said, "We can look into that now that you've brought it to our attention."

On Friday, a UH spokeswoman e-mailed The Plain Dealer to say that the health system planned to change the billing information immediately. Patients will see the



[PDF of graphic](#)

difference in next month's bills, she said.

Gary Benjamin, a spokesman from the [Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio](#), said University Hospitals just recently began posting its charity care policy online and providing it in brochures.

"What's in it for a hospital to sort of keep the thing secret is that they don't have to give away as much free and discounted care," he said. "But the flip side of that is as a not-for-profit they have duties to the community they have to fill."

Hospitals across the country are revamping their charity care policies for two reasons: Federal lawmakers continue to pressure nonprofit hospitals to justify their tax-exempt status. High unemployment and the economic downturn mean many families aren't able to pay high health-care bills, said Benjamin Isgur, director of the [Health Research Institute for PriceWaterhouseCoopers](#).

"They are looking at the reality -- people who are not going to make a lot of money aren't going to pay," Isgur said, adding that providing assistance to families who earn up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level is "toward the upper range of most hospital policies."

"Here's what that means to you as a patient: If you qualify for charity care, then you're in the system and there is no expectation of payment. If you are not qualified for charity care, then you're in the position of owing the hospital money," Isgur said.

There is no federal standard for what amount of free care hospitals should provide. In Ohio, the state's Hospital Care Assurance Program provides hospitals with extra funding so they can provide free care to patients earning up to the federal poverty level -- which in 2009 is an annual income of \$22,050 for a family of four. Beyond that, there is no requirement that hospitals provide free care.

Cuyahoga County's public [MetroHealth System](#) also changed its charity care policy earlier this year and now provides assistance for patients earning up to 400 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, meaning that the region's three largest health systems provide relatively high amounts of charitable assistance.

Heidi Gartland, vice president of government relations at University Hospitals, said the health system looked at the needs of the community before revamping its policy and noted a trend of more people with higher incomes going without insurance.

"We realize the economy is more difficult," Gartland said.

Still, UH customer service manager Smith said she had not seen an increase in charity care requests from patients since the hospital expanded its policy late last year. The hospital system also could not say how many people have signed up for its medical indigent program.

The new policy, which expands those who qualify for assistance from up to 250 percent of the federal poverty level to those who earn up to 400 percent, adds 700,000 Greater Clevelanders to the pool of people who potentially could get help.

About 63 percent, or 1.8 million people, fall under 400 percent of federal poverty level, which starts at \$43,320 for an individual, with thousands of dollars being added for each additional family member.

Benjamin warned that the incomes may sound high but that the average medical bill is also very high.

"Costs have outstripped the old charity-care policies," Benjamin said. He added that under the new sliding-scale policies at all three hospitals, the more you earn, the less financial help you get.

The Cleveland Clinic has provided assistance for patients up to 400 percent of the poverty level since 2004 regardless of insurance coverage.

"More and more people are becoming underinsured, meaning there are more and more out-of-pocket expenses," said Lyman Sornberger, executive director of patient financial services for the Clinic.

Since the beginning of the year, the Clinic has seen an upward trend in the amount of charity care it provides, although it declined to provide the specific dollar amount.

*Computer-assisted reporting editor Rich Exner contributed to this story.*

Categories: [Medical](#), [Real Time News](#)

- [University Hospitals' charity care policy](http://uhhospitals.org/PatientsVisitors/CharityCare/tabid/4883/Default.aspx) (http://uhhospitals.org/PatientsVisitors/CharityCare/tabid/4883/Default.aspx)
- [Cleveland Clinic's financial assistance policy](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/patients/billing_legal/billing/assistance.aspx) (http://my.clevelandclinic.org/patients/billing\_legal/billing/assistance.aspx)
- [MetroHealth System's community discount program](http://www.metrohealth.org/body.cfm?id=2246). (http://www.metrohealth.org/body.cfm?id=2246)

# Do you qualify for help with your hospital bill?

Both University Hospitals and the Cleveland Clinic offer financial help for families with incomes up to 400 percent of the federally recognized poverty level.

The chart on the back of a Clinic bill spells out that families earning up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level qualify for aid.

The chart on the back of a UH bill shows the poverty guidelines, without explaining that aid could be available to families who make more.

2009 Federal Poverty  
Income Guidelines

Size of Family Unit	*(HCAP) 2009 Federal Poverty Income Level	CC Financial Assistance Program (Family income up to 400% of Federal Property Level)
1	\$10,830	\$43,320
2	\$14,570	\$58,280
3	\$18,310	\$73,240
4	\$22,050	\$88,200
5	\$25,790	\$103,160
6	\$29,530	\$118,120
7	\$33,270	\$133,080
8*	\$37,010	\$148,040

\*For each additional family member add \$3,740

Year 2009 Income Guidelines

Persons in family	Poverty guideline
1	
2	\$10,830
3	14,570
4	18,310
5	22,050
6	25,790
7	29,530
8	33,270
	37,010

For families with more than 8 persons, add \$3,740 for each additional person

available to patients at family income levels up to 400 times the Federal Poverty Guidelines.  
in special circumstances.

Cleveland Clinic bill

University Hospitals bill