

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Advocacy groups say hospitals don't provide enough information to patients about charity care

Wednesday, May 5, 2010 12:00 PM

By [Suzanne Hoholik](#)

Hospitals across the nation aren't doing enough to inform patients about charity care programs that could cover some or all of their medical costs, according to a report released today.

The Access Project and Community Catalyst, two Boston-based health advocacy groups, surveyed 99 of the nearly 5,000 U.S. hospitals last summer.

The groups found that about 85 percent of hospitals mention charity care programs to patients and that fewer than half provide application forms to patients.

In lieu of paying federal or state taxes, nonprofit hospitals are expected to provide free or discounted medical care to low-income patients.

Under the new health reform law, nonprofit hospitals must write financial assistance policies that clearly specify eligibility criteria and widely publicize these policies.

The law also prohibits hospitals from taking extraordinary collection actions before making a reasonable effort to determine if patients are eligible for financial assistance.

Franklin County hospital leaders say the amount of free care they provide to the uninsured poor increased 163 percent from 2005 through 2009.

In fiscal year 2008, Columbus four hospital systems reported a combined \$5.5 billion in revenue and said they gave away \$262 million in free and subsidized care. That's about 5 percent of operating expenses.

In 2007, the hospitals combined revenue was \$5.2 billion and they reported providing \$228 million in charity care.

Still, the health advocacy groups say this isn't enough.

They want federal and state governments to require hospitals to publicize financial assistance policies, be more transparent with how much free or discounted care they give and make sure that patients are aware of assistance programs before sending their bills to collection agencies.