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Study shows nonprofit hospitals under-publicize charity care

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Nonprofit hospitals, which, in lieu of paying taxes, are expected to provide free or discounted medical care to low-income patients, should do a better job educating patients about their charity care policies, concludes a report issued by Boston-based health advocacy groups The Access Project and Community Catalyst.

The teams found that 85 percent of the 99 hospitals surveyed mention charity-care programs to patients, but that fewer than half provide applications for financial help, and a quarter post eligibility criteria for the programs on their websites.

"A mention on the website that there's charity care is helpful, but actually having the specific information on the policy is far more useful to a patient or potential patient," says Mark Rukavina, director of the Boston-based Access Project.

But the American Hospital Association, which issued voluntary guidelines for charity care for its members in 2003, says the new survey is too small to be meaningful. "A survey of 99 hospitals [out of roughly 2,900 nonprofit hospitals in the country] is not convincing to us," says Melinda Hatton, the industry association's general counsel. "And it's out of sync: The concerns at the heart of the report have been dealt with in the healthcare reform bill, which we supported."

Under the new health-reform law, nonprofit hospitals must have written and widely publicized financial-assistance policies that specify eligibility criteria. The law also prohibits hospitals from taking "extraordinary" actions to collect before making a "reasonable effort" to determine whether patients are eligible for financial assistance.

The new rules go into effect in the next tax year for hospitals. In addition, the Secretary of the Treasury will report annually to several congressional committees on the levels of charity care provided by the nation's nonprofit hospitals.

To learn more:

- read this *Kaiser Health News* [article](#) [1]
- read this *Columbus Dispatch* [piece](#) [2]
- check out this Community Catalyst [report](#) [3]

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