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PRESS RELEASE

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NEW REPORT CHALLENGES MYTH OF FREE HEALTH CARE FOR THE UNINSURED

Half of Uninsured Who Used "Safety Net" Facilities Report Medical Debt

A survey of 6,884 uninsured people in 18 states found that most who receive medical care have enormous difficulty affording it, even at "safety net" institutions with a mission to provide services to poor and uninsured individuals. The survey report, *Paying for Health Care When You're Uninsured: How Much Support Does the Safety Net Offer?*, is being released today by The Access Project, a resource center affiliated with Brandeis University that assists local groups working to improve access to healthcare.

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The survey found that 60 percent of respondents said they needed help paying their medical bills and nearly half (46%) reported having unpaid bills or being in debt to the facility where they received care.

"We were paying what we could afford each month faithfully, \$50 to \$75. But the hospital told us if we couldn't pay the whole bill in six months, we'd be turned over to a collection agency. . . . We have \$16,000 of medical bills," one of the survey respondents said. Another told the survey team, "I haven't worked since I had open heart surgery. I just filed for bankruptcy."

About one-quarter (24%) of respondents with outstanding bills said their debt would deter them from seeking care at the same facility in the future. One parent who was interviewed said, “I am ashamed to take my kids to the physician because I think he knows I owe \$35.” Another said, “I am scared to go back because I owe a lot.”

The need for financial assistance was high no matter where patients received care. However, uninsured patients who obtained care in a hospital emergency room (ER) or used both an ER and a hospital outpatient department were consistently more likely to experience financial hardships than those who obtained care in a hospital outpatient department only or in a community health center.

“Our study contradicts a common belief that uninsured people can get free care when they need it,” said Access Project Director Mark Rukavina. “We heard many stories about bills being turned over to collection agencies and people being scared or too ashamed to go back to their providers because they owe them money. The irony is that almost half who said they needed financial help with their bills reported that they were never offered information about whether financial assistance programs were available to them.”

Survey results strongly suggest that getting information about financial assistance programs helps patients avoid medical debt. Among those who reported needing financial help, nearly 70% of the respondents who said staff “never” offered information about financial assistance programs had outstanding medical bills at the facility, compared to 45% of those who said that staff “always” offered information. The report’s authors recommend that safety net facilities offer financial counseling and program eligibility screening for all uninsured patients they serve.

"This report points to the serious problems people face because of the failures of our overall health care system. Although community health centers and other safety net providers work valiantly to provide vital health care to millions of uninsured Americans, they can't solve the problem on their own," said Dan Hawkins, Vice President for Federal, State and Public Affairs, National Association of Community Health Centers. “In the short run, it is important that safety net providers do more to help their patients by making financial counseling and screening for assistance more widely available. Over the longer term, we need action to make coverage more affordable and to put our nation on the road toward universal health care coverage."

Other findings highlighted in the report include the following:

- Fifty-six percent of respondents who received prescriptions reported they needed help to pay for medications, with uninsured emergency room patients and those from rural areas most likely to report needing financial assistance.
- Fully 14% of those given prescriptions at urban or suburban hospitals obtained none or only some of their medications because of cost. In the rural hospitals, the situation was even worse at 27%.

“Walking into any hospital or health clinic to get care when you don’t have insurance may come with a hefty price tag. You could very well end up in medical debt that makes you think twice about going back the next time you are sick,” said Dennis Andrulis, PhD, a research professor at SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York, and lead author of the report.

“We expect many more people to join the ranks of the 41 million uninsured because of rising unemployment and anticipated cuts in state Medicaid budgets. People without health insurance are likely to have even more difficulty affording needed medical care in the near future—and that will mean more people strapped with medical debt.”

The Access Project received a grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to conduct this survey of uninsured people and disseminate the results. The goal of the initiative was to hear directly from people without insurance about their experiences accessing health care services.

The Access Project and Dr. Andrulis are distributing the report to state and federal policy officials to help them address the needs of the growing number of people who need financial assistance to afford medical care.

Survey data were collected in the summer of 2000. The report is based on interviews with people who were uninsured and received health care during the prior 12 months at hospitals and clinics in the following 18 states: Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Go to our website at www.accessproject.org for the full report, personal stories, a list of national experts and local spokespeople, and links to related health issue websites. Printed copies of the report are available from The Access Project, 30 Winter Street, Suite 930, Boston, MA 02108, (617) 654-9911.