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'Washtenaw Uncovered' Reveals Needs of the Uninsured

Over 36,000 Washtenaw County residents, 11% of the population, lack health insurance according to the Michigan Primary Care Association. Nearly half of the uninsured were without coverage for less than a year; while approximately one-quarter lacked insurance for five years or more. Uninsured Washtenaw County residents are 11 years younger than those who are insured, more likely to be employed and less likely to be students than those who have health coverage. Approximately 58,000 (18%) Washtenaw County residents lack dental insurance, according to the Washtenaw County 2000 Health Improvement Plan (HIP) survey.

These statistics, and other describing the needs of the uninsured, are described in a new report, 'Washtenaw Uncovered: A two part report examining health disparities of uninsured and medically needy populations and the safety net of providers that serves them in Washtenaw County,' just published by the Washtenaw County Public Health Department. This report localizes a national project 'Monitoring the Safety Net' that was conducted by the Agency on Healthcare Research and Quality and defined the group of persons who are uninsured or are covered by Medicaid, or who are members of other medically vulnerable populations, as the 'Safety Net' population. The health care providers that serve a large proportion of these persons are collectively referred to as the 'Safety Net.'

"Health insurance is a critical component of enabling access to medical care," notes Ellen Clement, MSW, MPH, Health Officer, Washtenaw County Public Health. "Uninsured individuals are more likely to have poorer health, higher mortality rates and receive less routine screening or standard preventive services than those who are insured," said Clement.

Nearly 18,000 persons in the U.S. die annually because they lack health insurance, according to the U.S. Institute of Medicine (IOM). According to the IOM, the public sector finances approximately 85% of the \$34 to \$38 billion of the care that the uninsured are not able to pay for. While Washtenaw County is recognized widely for its affluence and its wealth of medical resources, availability of these resources does not necessarily guarantee equitable access to quality health care for all individuals. "In fact, higher average incomes and correspondent high costs of living," according to author of the Washtenaw report, Adreanne Waller, MPH, "may magnify the challenges for individuals living below the financial norm. Washtenaw County's poverty and uninsurance levels are comparable with Michigan; yet for persons living at or

below poverty levels, Washtenaw County's uninsurance rates are markedly higher than those for Michigan."

According to 'Washtenaw Uncovered,' data from the 2000 HIP survey suggest that uninsured 18-29 year old Washtenaw County residents are much more likely to not have a usual source of medical care, not able to see a physician because of cost, not have dental insurance, not had their blood pressure or cholesterol checked in the past year and have untreated health conditions than insured Washtenaw County residents. Lack of adequate health care is also negatively associated with lack of prenatal care and low birth weight births. Washtenaw County residents use emergency departments at lower rates than expected. While 11% of the population is uninsured, only 7-8% of ED visits in the four hospitals in Washtenaw County were by uninsured individuals.

Thirteen Safety Net providers participated in an extensive survey conducted by the Public Health Department to determine structure, funding and practice challenges and opportunities in serving this population. Most of these providers, clustered in the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti areas, accept Medicaid and private insurance, as well as offer sliding scale fees and free medical services. Most provide primary and gynecologic care onsite, but are least likely to offer obstetrical, dental, emergency care, diagnostic tests, medications, substance abuse or mental health services. Besides poverty, Safety Net providers identified transportation, dual diagnosis (substance abuse and mental illness), food instability, homelessness, language and cultural issues, and navigating the complex health care system as common obstacles for Safety Net patients.

Link to 'Washtenaw Uncovered' report:

http://www.ewashtenaw.org/government/departments/public_health