

News Texas programs will help women's health care

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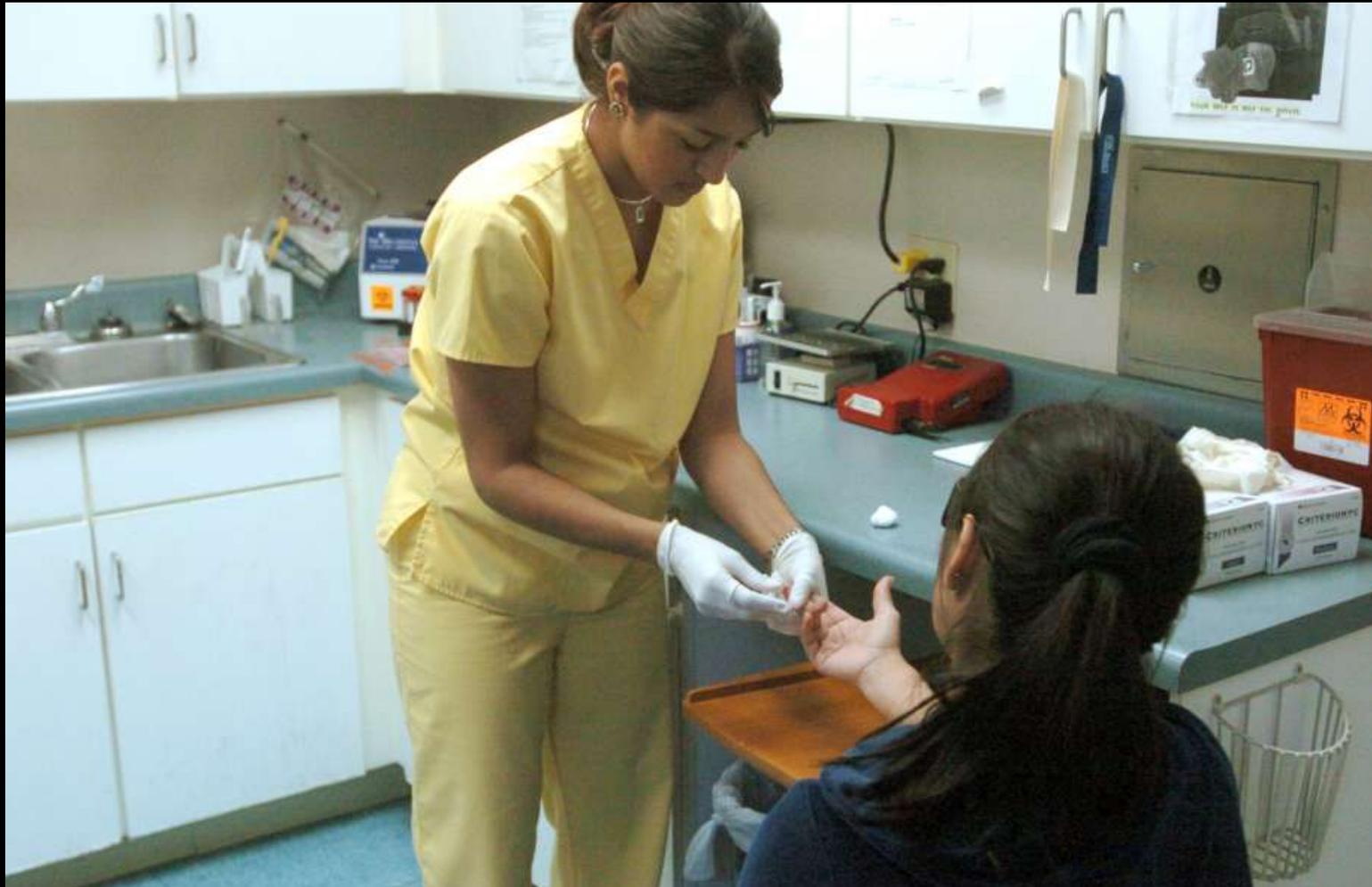




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New Texas programs launching July 1 represent an important opportunity to serve thousands of women in need of basic health screenings and services. Participation is needed from providers.

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If you've been paying attention to health care news coming out of Texas, you know the state continues to face barriers to restoring the safety net for women's preventive health care. What you may not know is that Texas will be rolling out two women's programs to improve access to basic health screenings and preventive care.

Without a doubt, Texas faces big challenges in getting these essential, potentially lifesaving services to the nearly 1.8 million Texas women in need of publicly subsidized family-planning services. In Bexar County alone, more than 126,000 women are in need of these services. Texas is still recovering from dramatic family-planning cuts in 2011, which devastated the women's health safety net. More than 80 clinics closed, and some of the largest service providers were excluded from the program.

In 2013 and 2015, the Legislature restored and increased funding for women's preventive health care. With this funding, the women's health care safety net is under repair. While the capacity of health care providers to meet the need is uncertain, state agencies are working to recruit additional providers.

These challenges are all the more reason to focus on new opportunities to expand access to care. Texas is launching two new programs July 1: Healthy Texas Women and the new Family Planning Program. Housed within the [Health and Human Services Commission](#), these programs will consolidate and revamp the state's current family-planning programs.

Between the two programs, Texas women of childbearing age (and men, too) will be able to get important preventive care like an annual exam; contraceptive care; screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections; screening for hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol; breast and cervical cancer screening and diagnostic services; and immunizations.

Together, these programs represent an important opportunity to serve thousands of women across Texas. These programs need all the attention and support they can get. Participation is needed from providers — including family physicians, hospitals, federally qualified health centers, and specialized family planning clinics — particularly those serving rural and underserved areas.

Access to preventive and preconception health care means healthy, planned pregnancies, and early detection of cancers and other conditions. Women whose pregnancies are planned are more likely to receive early prenatal care, a major determinant of healthy pregnancies and deliveries.

A recent series in the San Antonio Express-News highlighted the significant challenges in Bexar County, where nearly 1 in 6 women who gave birth received no prenatal care in 2014. The premature birth rate in San Antonio is 11.5 percent, among the highest in the United States. Increasing access to preventive and preconception care is critical for improving infant and maternal health outcomes across Texas.

Contraceptive care also saves taxpayers money: For every \$1 spent on contraception, Texas can expect more than a \$7 “return on investment” through savings on Medicaid deliveries and infant care, as well as other medical and social costs.

Texas also is implementing new policies that will help improve access to contraceptive care. Women who use Medicaid for their pregnancy lose that coverage two months after giving birth. Soon, these new moms will be automatically enrolled into Healthy Texas Women 60 days after their baby is born, helping ensure they have continuous access to family planning and other preventive care. The state is also focused on removing barriers to long-acting reversible contraceptives.

Texas women deserve to have their essential health services needs met. Our state’s new programs can address these needs — with the support of stakeholders across the state.

Janet Realini, M.D., MPH, is chairwoman of the Texas Women’s **Healthcare Coalition**.

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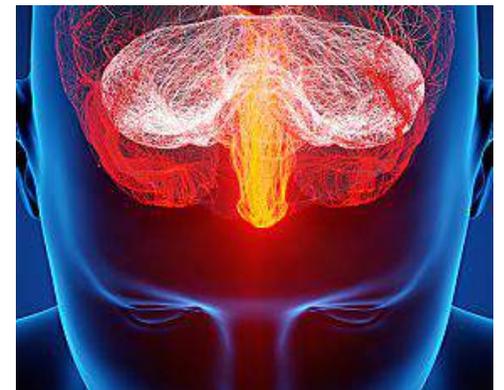
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