

COMMENTARY: Increasing health care for Texas women

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Texas continues to face barriers to restoring the safety net for women's preventive health care. But in the coming months, the state will be rolling out two women's health programs to improve access to basic health screenings and preventive care.

Texas certainly faces big challenges in getting these essential, potentially life-saving services to the nearly 1.8 million Texas women in need of publicly subsidized family planning services. In Hidalgo County, there are over 70,000 women in need of these services, and over 114,000 women in need throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

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. Women in the RGV were disproportionately impacted by these closures and continue to face significant barriers accessing care. Nuestro Texas, a human rights campaign focused on reproductive health access with a focus on the Rio Grande Valley, reported in 2013 nearly one-third of state-funded family clinics in the Valley had closed. Many other clinics have been forced to reduce services or increase costs.

In 2013 and 2015, the Legislature restored and increased funding for women's preventive health care. With this state funding, the women's healthcare safety net is under repair. And while the capacity of healthcare providers to meet the



Planned Parenthood sign

need for services is uncertain, state agencies are working to recruit additional providers for the programs.

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

Between the two programs, Texas women of child-bearing age (and men too) will be able to get important preventive care. This includes: annual exams, immunizations, contraceptive care, screenings and treatments for sexually transmitted infections, hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol, as well as breast and cervical cancer screenings and diagnostic services.

These programs represent an important opportunity to serve thousands of women across Texas who are in need of basic health screenings and preventive services.

These programs need our attention and support. Participation is needed from 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 — including health screenings and contraception — means healthy, planned pregnancies and early detection of cancers and other treatable conditions. Women whose pregnancies are planned are much more likely to receive early prenatal care, which is a major determinant of healthy pregnancies and deliveries. The RGV has the highest concentration of preterm births across Texas. Increasing access to preventive and preconception care is a critical strategy for improving infant and maternal health outcomes in the region and across the state.

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

Along with the launch of the new programs, Texas is implementing new policies that will help improve access to contraceptive care. Women who have Medicaid during 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. This will ensure that they have continuous access to family planning and other preventive care. The state is also focused on removing barriers to long-acting reversible contraceptives (implants and intrauterine devices). Texas has increased access to these more effective forms of birth control by updating reimbursement rates and increasing provider training and education.

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

Dr. Janet Realini is chair of the Texas Women's Healthcare Coalition.