

Program Provides Specialty Care to Uninsured

BY SHANNON MUCHMORE
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When Haley Conley, pictured with her daughter Taleah, broke her finger and was told she might need surgery, she had to say no because she couldn't afford it.

The single mother works multiple jobs but doesn't get insurance through work. She doesn't qualify for Medicaid.

"I'm stuck in the middle," she said.

But through a new program that helps people who don't have health insurance and couldn't otherwise afford it to seek treatment from a specialist, she is in physical therapy and using her hand more and more every day.

"I know how expensive it (medical care) is," she said. "It's just a blessing they've helped me so much."

Project TCMS by the Tulsa County Medical Society Foundation is coordinating volunteer physicians, safety net clinics, medical laboratories, hospitals and prostheses companies to help those who need treatment beyond what a primary care provider can offer.

A safety net clinic can refer a patient who needs specialty care to Project TCMS, which will find a physician to see the patient and help schedule lab or imaging work that needs to be done.

Since it began operations in April, 35 people have been referred to the project, although not all of them qualified. Organizers have a goal

to help 100 people by the end of the year, said Kim Morris, program manager.

Project TCMS patient Deanna Martinez recently saw a dermatologist to check a troubling mark on her skin. She has had skin cancer before and was worried she would be facing it again. This time



without insurance. In December, she was laid off from the Texas hospital she had worked at for 42 years. About three months later, she moved in with her mother in Tulsa.

She's not used to asking for help, she said.

"It's very hard," she said. "It's still hard. Because I've never ever done it before."

She expected to be treated differently at the doctor's office but found that she received the same experience as all the insured patients around her, she said.

"I was totally blown away by the whole experience," she said.

Dr. John Phillips, a recently retired general surgeon who has been recruiting physicians to participate in the project said he has had no trouble getting them involved.

"It has been extremely gratifying to see how the physicians seem very willing to do the work," he said.

By recruiting enough doctors, the patients can be spread out among the specialists so that they each see about one a month, he said.

Morris said that 66 physicians in nine specialties have pledged to be a part of the project.

Phillips said most of the people who need help are the working poor.

"It's people primarily that are prideful," he said.

"They have a job. They're people you want to help."

For more information, call 918-236-3442.

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