



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Newly insured trickle in to hospitals, clinics

By Andrew Oxford

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The number of New Mexicans covered under Medicaid swelled by more than 103,000 since eligibility requirements were broadened in October 2013 but it remains uncertain what impact that will have on local doctors and hospitals, according to providers.

Taos Health Systems, which includes Holy Cross Hospital, reported an uptick in new patients after coverage plans offered under Medicaid and the federal insurance exchange took effect Jan. 1.

“It can be attributed to a few different things,” marketing and public relations manager Maria Meadowcroft said, noting more local residents have insurance but the nonprofit has also invested heavily in marketing new services. Applications to the Taos County indigent health care fund declined only slightly after the beginning of the year. The only slight decline did not indicate a substantial number of local residents who relied on the program to cover their hospital bills enrolled in Medicaid though such trends had been noted in other counties.

The indigent fund coordinator reported 156 new applications between October and December but 134 from January to March.

The outcomes of expanding access to health insurance have been similarly mixed at Los Alamos Medical Center. “We have not seen any improvements in patient numbers,” CEO Feliciano Jiron told *The Taos News*. “We still have a lot of people coming through our doors who are not aware they are eligible for Medicaid or the federal health insurance exchange.”

The work of enrolling patients in new health care plans continued, he said, explaining staff are still providing guidance on a daily basis to local residents who arrive without insurance.

“Many people do not know they are eligible for these services,” Jiron added.

Hospitals like Holy Cross and Los Alamos Medical Center are counting on business from the newly insured to bolster revenues amid cuts to state funding but Jiron’s analysis reflects the caution among administrators that the impact of broader access to health coverage will only be felt slowly over time. Approximately 16 percent of Taos County residents were already insured under Medicaid prior to the expansion of the program’s eligibility requirements. It remains unclear how many local residents have enrolled in the state program since then.

But officials at Holy Cross Hospital, which lost more than \$5 million last year, have cautioned any growth in insurance enrollment is not likely to be a panacea for the nonprofit’s financial ills especially as incentives shift to providing preventive care rather than emergency services.

Preventive care is exactly what Lore Pease, CEO of El Centro Family Health, is hoping newly insured patients will seek. The network of clinics has reported an influx of new patients. “We definitely noticed more Medicaid,” Pease said. “These low-income people weren’t getting the care they needed. Now they have choices and they can get some prevention.”