

Group works with county on health care initiative

Volunteers spreading Healthy Howard message

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A group of volunteers plan to spend their Saturdays this summer in Howard County neighborhoods, knocking on doors and making a pitch.

The volunteers, members of People Acting Together in Howard, are not selling anything but, rather, hope to find some of the 20,000 people in the county without health insurance and tell them they might qualify for Healthy Howard, a county-subsidized health program.

PATH, a coalition of more than a dozen local congregations, chooses causes like health care to bring to the attention of citizens and politicians.

On May 15, some 20 PATH members gathered at Bethany United Methodist Church, in Ellicott City, before hitting surrounding neighborhoods with their health care message.

Campaign organizer Jessica Jones said the technique of directly engaging residents helps build community relationships.

"It's kind of counterculture to our folks," Jones said. "They're not used to being out on people's doorsteps."

When meeting residents, PATH volunteers ask about their health care status and if anyone in their household might need Healthy Howard services.

On May 15, however, many knocks at the Plum Tree Apartments from volunteer Kevin Doxzen went unanswered or residents told him they were covered by an existing plan.

"Once in awhile, you get someone who can use it and then it's way worth it," Doxzen said, affixing a green-and-white promotional sticky note on an apartment door. "Who knows, even this may help."

Last weekend's canvassing event reached 46 uninsured people, 36 of which agreed to share their phone numbers for follow-up calls. PATH members also knocked on 604 doors during prior canvassing events, which led to an increase in phone calls and Web site hits for Healthy Howard.

PATH efforts praised

Dr. Peter Beilenson, health officer for the county and chairman of the Healthy Howard board of directors, said PATH's efforts have helped Healthy Howard, which did not allocate funding for marketing this year.

"The bottom line (is) we are running this on extremely modest, bare bones," he said. "... Because there's no marketing, we have to rely on word of mouth and in this case, PATH's efforts are extremely helpful."

Healthy Howard has more than 600 enrollees and has helped more than 4,000 people find other insurance programs since its inception in 2008.

Thirty-five people reached by the PATH campaign earlier this spring have already qualified for the program, Beilenson said.

The canvassing campaign, which will last through the summer and target neighborhoods where organizers believe many uninsured people live, is funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

"There really is no substitute for it. You can't do it on Facebook, you can't do it on Twitter, you can't do it on television," lead organizer Cynthia Marshall said.

PATH members decided to adopt health care as a cause after interviewing nearly 500 Howard County residents last year about pressing community issues.

"The number one issue that came out of those meetings was access to health care," Marshall said. "For a lot of people it was their adult children who were going without health care."

Healthy Howard Inc. has come under scrutiny in recent weeks as the County Council reviewed County Executive Kenneth Ulman's \$824 million fiscal 2011 operating budget, which included \$500,000 for the nonprofit.

Council members Gregory Fox, a Republican, and Courtney Watson, a Democrat, proposed cutting the Healthy Howard budget by about 50 percent, but could not garner support from their colleagues to move the measures forward.

The health plan is only expected to require funding until 2014, when the recently adopted federal reform program will require all Americans to have some form of insurance.

The program will likely turn into a health cooperative at that point, Beilenson said.

Marshall said she does not know what the group's next step in the health care campaign will be, but PATH will continue its efforts regardless of Healthy Howard's expiration date.

"We think the people who are signing up are likely to be people who might transition well into a co-op," she said. "Having a strong Healthy Howard program will help make a strong co-op program."