

Waiting: Three to five months for first appointments at Neighborhood Health Centers

A PUP Report



January 2007

Jobless and Underpaid for Justice

<http://www.philaup.org/>

PAGE 1

The Philadelphia Unemployment Project [PUP] is a membership organization of low-wage workers and the unemployed. PUP has fought for jobs, public benefits and economic justice since 1975. Its sister organization, **The Unemployment Information Center**, helps people win unemployment cases, save their houses and get access to health care.

The **PUP Health Care Committee** has fought to make sure that:

- the City has minimum treatment guidelines at the City Health Centers
- hospitals adhere to Hill-Burton Act requirements to provide free services to low-income patients
- the Commonwealth created adultBasic, a state-subsidized, low-cost health insurance plan for low-income Pennsylvania adults.

Executive Summary

A group of PUP volunteers and staff called District Health Centers as first time patients and residents of Philadelphia without health insurance. Without finalizing any appointments, we tried to get the earliest dates out of schedulers at all of the clinics (except H.C. #1).

At the end of forty-four calls (part made in July and part in October), 40 of the calls resulted in appointment offers more than 3 months out and 18 were 4 or more months. Some callers were offered appointments no sooner than six months out.

The need

Philadelphia's District Health Centers are remarkable. They provide a high level of care to the poor and underemployed, either at no charge or low cost. This becomes more critical as fewer jobs come with health benefits. After all, the uninsured are working people. 82% of the uninsured live in families headed by **workers** and 59% of uninsured workers are **full-year and full-time**.

PUP members have organized around access to health care since 1976, when it first negotiated with Delco Hospital to provide free care to the underemployed and unemployed and set up an appeals process for those rejected for free care.

In 1988, PUP members supported the creation of the Strawberry Mansion Health Center to support that neighborhood.

In 1991, PUP provided leadership in a coalition that convinced City Council to require basic services at all the District Health Centers.

As the need for health care has increased, capacity at the health care centers has not. In the enclosed report, a test of uninsured persons access to the health center system found that a person might wait as long as six months for a first appointment.

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PAGE 3

**If you called
today ...**



PUP members and staff schedule appointments at Philadelphia Neighborhood health Centers.

On the afternoon of July 6th and October 26th, members and staff called all of the District Health Centers (except #1). We described ourselves as Philadelphia residents without insurance who had not used the center before. We asked to schedule a first time check-up with a health center physician.

Once the operator offered the caller dates, we did not finalize any appointments so that no slots that could have been used by a person in need were taken. The results follow.

PAGE 4 RESULTS—PART 1

All calls on 7/6/06	Health Center	Earliest Appointmen t	Wait - months	Notes
1:20 PM	Straw. Mans.	8/10	2	
3:00 PM	#5	8/21	1	
3:08 PM	#10	1/24	6	
3:14PM	#6	October	3	Walk-in suggested
3:14 PM	#5	No appt.	—	Would not schedule without social security number
3:14 PM	#3	8/15	1	
3:17 PM	Straw. Mans.	8/14	1	
3:20 PM	#4	10/31	3	
3:20 PM	#10	1/22	6	3 call attempts
3:20 PM	#2	7/24 or 10/13	0.5	
3:24 PM	#9	11/14	4	
3:28 PM	#4	11/2	4	
3:34 PM	#2	10/13	3	
3:40 PM	#6	10/18	3	
3:49 PM	#3	8/15	1	

PAGE 5

Results—Part 2

All calls on Oct. 26, 2006	Health Center	Earliest Appointment	Wait (months)
2:40 PM	#2	Feb.	4
2:42 PM	#2	Sometime next year	3?
2:47 PM	#2	Feb. 7	4
2:29 PM	#3	Dec 18	2
2:30 PM	#3	Dec. 18	2
2:50 PM	#3	Feb.	4
2:37 PM	#4	Feb. 8	4
2:39 PM	#4	Sometime next year	3?
2:40 PM	#5	Dec. 13	2
2:40 PM	#5	Feb. 1	3
2:54 PM	#5	Dec. 15	2
4:24 PM	#5	Dec. 28	2
2:45 PM	#6	Feb.	4
2:45 PM	#6	Feb.	4
2:48 PM	#6	Feb.	4
2:56 PM	#6	Feb 7	3
4:27 PM	#6	Feb. 6	3

PAGE 6

Results—Continued

All calls on Oct. 26, 2006	Health Center	Earliest Appointment	Wait (months)
2:30 PM	#9	Dec.	1
2:32 PM	#9	Feb.	4
2:55 PM	#9	Feb. 6,	3
10:50 AM, 10/27	#9	Feb. 16,	4
2:34 PM	#10	Apr.	6
2:35 PM	#10	Mar.	5
2:35 PM	#10	Mar.	5
3:18 PM	#10	Mar. 30	5
10:58 AM, 10/27	#10	Mar.	5
2:30 PM	Straw. Mans.	“Sometime next year”	3?
2:41 PM	Straw. Mans.	Dec. 20	2
2:49 PM	Straw. Mans.	Dec. 18	2
3:20 PM	Straw. Mans.	Feb 2	3

Number of calls, with wait times:

1 month	2 months	3 months	4 months	5 months	6 months
6	8	12	11	4	3

PAGE 7

What we saw ...

Staff operators were friendly and courteous when we called. We reached an operator very quickly on almost all the calls. While we observed some inconsistencies in questions operators asked callers and procedures that they followed, these were not alarming.

Some members of scheduling staff were very insistent about asking for social security numbers before scheduling while others were not. Some of our callers gave their social security number and some did not. Some of those who did not were also not able to get a date offered to them. Only sometimes, though. The procedure was not consistent from call-to-call.

That said, If you asked to make a first appointment on the afternoon of July 6th, you were as likely to get an offer for a first appointment 3 months out as you were to be offered an appointment in August. The results were more discouraging in October.

Three months could be a dangerous amount of time. Many lower income people are less likely to seek care until it becomes urgent. If they don't describe that need to an operator, they might wait too long for their condition to be evaluated.

We find it interesting that no one was offered appointments in September or December during the July calls. Nor in January during the October calls.

Each health center offers one evening of extended hours, either till 7:30 or 8PM. **We believe all health centers should stay open into the evening every week night and that Saturday should be a normal service day as well**, because most of the uninsured are working people.

Six of our fifteen July attempts to schedule first appointments were given appointments in August. In October, almost twice as many people were offered four month waits as opposed to two, at the earliest.

We find that the reputation for long waits is well known to uninsured people who come through our office. Many people who should use health centers have never tried because they do not want to wait a long time for an appointment or spend a day waiting at the health center itself for a walk-in.

Recommendations

The Philadelphia Unemployment Project will pursue greater support for the Ambulatory Health Care budget within the Department of Health. We believe the Department of Health is getting as many patients into its Neighborhood Health Centers as it can, as quickly as it can.

The demand for health care can only increase as more people lack insurance and more people work full-time without a health insurance plan. We believe the Neighborhood Health Centers deserve both expanded staff and expanded hours.

P.U.P. has a strong commitment to public health. The quality and access provided by strong public health facilities is unmatched. We regret the lack of a public hospital in Philadelphia. Without the District Health Centers to pick up the slack, the poor would suffer more acutely and cost the city far more.

Right now, the Ambulatory Health unit of the City's Department of Health is understaffed. City Council approved new hires for the system for 2006, but the City failed even to keep up with rehiring vacated positions, let alone filling new positions. *City Hall has not moved swiftly enough on getting these positions filled.* **The City should make filling these vacated and newly created position a first priority.** Health Center capacity is directly linked to staffing levels. Unless this problem is corrected, centers may have to contract services in the face of expanding need.

Currently, each Health Center has designated one night of the week to stay open into the evening (centers have different nights). **PUP would like to see all of the**

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