

Mayor's \$100M health care program supports the uninsured

A new city program will encourage more uninsured New Yorkers to seek primary and specialty care at NYC Health + Hospitals in lieu of visits to the system's emergency rooms.

Mayor Bill de Blasio said the program represented a "guarantee" that the city's 600,000 uninsured residents, including undocumented immigrants, would be able to access care.

The two-prong plan provides an option for those who either can't afford insurance or have chosen not to buy coverage. For those who can't pay or who are ineligible because of their immigration status, the NYC Care program will provide consistent access to NYC Health + Hospitals' facilities. Services at the health system's 11 hospitals and more than 70 clinics will be priced on a sliding scale, with those too poor to afford care receiving free services. Participants will also receive an NYC Care card with information on how to access care but will not be eligible for services from private medical providers.

People who are uninsured but earn too much to qualify can enroll in MetroPlus, which offers Medicare, Medicaid and other plans sold on the state's health insurance marketplace.

"From this moment on in New York City, everyone is guaranteed the right to health care," De Blasio said Tuesday at a press conference at NYC Health + Hospitals/Lincoln in the Bronx.

The city estimated the plan will cost at least \$100 million annually when it is fully implemented, but did not share how it arrived at that estimate or how many more visits it expects from uninsured patients.

The program will start this summer in the Bronx before being rolled out in all five boroughs by 2021, and will include access to pharmacy, mental health and substance abuse services.

At first glance, the program seems similar to the public health system's current program for treating the uninsured. The mission-driven organization sees patients regardless of their ability to pay and uses a sliding scale to determine how much patients owe based on their income.

The difference, said NYC Health + Hospitals CEO Mitchell Katz, is in the coordination that these participants will receive to get quick access to a doctor instead of showing up to an emergency room or clinic to be checked out.

"You can definitely walk into any emergency room, you can walk into any clinic, but what is missing is the good customer service when you get an available appointment," Katz said at the press conference.

The mayor said he believes the program will ultimately save taxpayers money because participants in NYC Care will be able to get routine care in a doctor's office as opposed to more expensive emergency room services.

Michael Sparer, chair of health policy and management at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, called the notion that every city resident deserves a basic level of health care "a good policy statement."

But Sparer cautioned that simply giving out NYC Care cards won't reverse the flow of people to emergency rooms. Even Medicaid beneficiaries tend to overuse the ER despite their coverage, he noted.

Dr. Kenneth Davis, CEO of Mount Sinai Health System, said he hoped the announcement would help ease concerns of undocumented immigrants who fear that accessing public insurance programs could put them at [risk of deportation](#) and encourage them to "engage in care on a continuous, preventive basis."

Davis said Mount Sinai treats the uninsured both in the emergency room and in outpatient settings and also uses a sliding scale to determine payments based on income. Mount Sinai does not turn patients away, he said.

The new program comes amid debate over universal health coverage at the state and federal levels. De Blasio said he supports a single-payer health system in which the government would cover all health costs, preferably at the federal level. He said he supports the New York Health Act, which would create a single-payer fund statewide, but is not sure it will pass the state Legislature during the upcoming session.

"This is a way of getting people health care here and now," the mayor said, "regardless of what happens at the state or federal level."