



Staten Island Advance

New group to advocate for family health care

Thursday, January 10, 2008

By **TEVAH PLATT**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — Seeking to improve Staten Islanders' access to health care, members of a new coalition are looking to borough residents to help set the agenda.

Health care advocates yesterday announced the launch of the first borough-wide Family Health Care Coalition, calling on the public to help shape the policies and programs that determine Islanders' access to care.

"If you had the power for one day, what would you do to make changes?" asked Judy Wessler, director of the Commission on the Public's Health System (CPHS), in announcing the initiative yesterday at a Borough Hall ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the city's Child Health Clinics.

The same question will appear on her agency's citywide survey, which will be administered to Staten Island parents and teens by Port Richmond's El Centro del Inmigrante (formerly known as El Centro de Hospitalidad).

Founding members of the Coalition, representing a spectrum of private and public health agencies and community leaders, stated their objectives broadly, waiting for public input and discussion before they draw up blueprint plans.

"The purpose of this Coalition is to advocate for changes in health care policy, programs and practices on Staten Island in order to fully ensure that all Staten Islanders, regardless of color, country or ability to pay, have access to quality, affordable health care," said Gonzalo Mercado, executive director of El Centro.

Health care advocates continue to point to the Island's lack of a public hospital and public primary care clinics for adults in identifying gaps in borough health care services.

In recent years, Staten Island's rate of uninsured residents has increased substantially among native and immigrant workers who cannot afford rising premiums.

Thousands of uninsured Islanders enrolled with Staten Island Health Access (SIHA) — a stop-gap program for Islanders ineligible for public insurance because of their immigration status, or because they earn slightly more money than allowed for participation in Medicaid or Family Health Plus — will lose that safety net if the program loses its funding this June.

After last June's 12-month extension, health advocates circulated a letter yesterday petitioning HHC to renew SIHA's funding. Ensuring the continuation of that program and establishing new urgent care centers throughout Staten Island will help, according to the Rev. Terry Troia, executive director of Project Hospitality.

The Coalition will hold its first meeting on Feb. 6 from noon to 2 at El Centro's 1546 Castleton Ave. headquarters. The organizers hope to bring together a broad cross-section of Island residents, community

activists and health care providers.

© 2008 Staten Island Advance

© 2008 SILive.com All Rights Reserved.