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EDITORIAL

Blue Ridge clinic fills health gap

Founded 45 years ago to serve migrant workers picking apples, Blue Ridge Community Health Services has grown to become one of the most important providers of health care in the area. Of the 23,000 active patients who use its primary, pediatric and dental services, only 10 percent have private insurance. Medicaid pays for 20 percent, but 63 percent are uninsured. The nonprofit is the last resort for many patients who would otherwise flood emergency rooms or suffer in silence.

The health provider's current home mirrors the health care generally: it's old, sometimes overwhelmed and in need of fixing up. The clinic has outgrown the old farmhouse on U.S. 64 at Howard Gap Road that it's used since 1983, and is poised for the next stage of its mission — a new building.

Whether Congress enacts a broad health care overhaul or not, clinics like Blue Ridge are an essential part of the picture.

"Unable to afford premiums, people are abandoning their insurance coverage and often taxing or inappropriately using emergency rooms for reasons that could be prevented if they had a health care home," Blue Ridge chairman Ronnie Reid said in a Times-News guest column last week.

Engineers discovered multiple problems inside the old farmhouse, from mold to electrical hazards and water damage. The facility was closed and offices relocated.

CEO Jennifer Henderson wants to consolidate operations at Blue Ridge Community Health Services. The organization has applied for a \$5.1 million federal stimulus grant, and hopes to build a 27,000-square-foot medical facility with a projected cost of \$7.2 million. The organization is also launching a private capital campaign to fund the expansion.

There are other options for Blue Ridge if the stimulus funding does not come through, but federal funds would certainly be welcome. As a provider of wellness and preventive care that saves money in the long run, Blue Ridge ought to have a good case.

Henderson's backup plan is to scale back the building's size and apply for a traditional construction loan from a bank. She expects to know whether the grant is approved by November.

Blue Ridge has developed several innovative programs to fund operations at the new building. The clinic has partnered with Pardee Hospital, which will put radiology and lab services in the building and pay Blue Ridge for the space.

The nonprofit primarily provides medical services to uninsured people, often the working poor who don't have medical coverage. The organization treats some 14,000 patients a year at six sites that includes three school-based offices. It receives 44 percent of its funds from federal grants, 40 percent from patient fees (on a sliding scale) and 16 percent from private grants.

If not for the Blue Ridge clinics, many of its patients would land in hospital emergency rooms or end up needing more expensive and aggressive care when health problems worsen. The continuing financial health of the Blue Ridge clinics assures better health for thousands of needy people while also helping Pardee and other hospitals avoid costly free care.