

The Union

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Western Sierra Medical remains committed in changing world of health care

Other Voices

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Health care has taken center stage during the past several years, prompting endless conversations and many spirited debates about the cost and coverage — and who is ultimately responsible for the most critical of services for communities across the nation.

Western Sierra Medical Clinic — the largest outpatient health care provider in Nevada and Sierra counties, serving about one of every five residents — is actively participating in debates underway in Washington, D.C. and Sacramento, advocating for a well-thought out process to keep our communities healthy.

As a community health center, Western Sierra's mission has always been to provide cost-effective, first-rate health care to our communities and their residents, from still-developing babies to veterans who served in the last world war.

We focus on the health of our patients. The commitment has proven a huge success, with fast-paced patient growth and the opening of new health centers from Penn Valley in Nevada County to Auburn and Kings Beach-Tahoe in Placer County during the past year.

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Of course, health care is never easy. There are endless challenges, from fast-rising costs to the uncertainty of reimbursement for services from government programs to private insurance companies.

But health care — and healthy residents — is the cornerstone of any community. How we attain that far-reaching goal has changed during the past four decades, and will continue to evolve in the years ahead.

Certainly, Western Sierra will continue to provide comprehensive medical, dental and behavioral health care services just as we have since our humble beginnings in 1975.

But how those health care services are delivered has changed dramatically.

For decades, health care centered on a fee-for-service model, where revenue was based on services provided, from checkups to tests. Under the model, the more patients and visits, the more revenue for health care providers. In short, the more sick patients often translated into a healthier bottom line for providers.

But health care has changed in recent years to a value-based model, where keeping patients healthy and improving the lives of those with chronic conditions — such as arthritis and diabetes — are important. With value-based medicine, the primary care provider works closely with patients on their care. It's about good communication and a solid relationship between patients and providers. An annual checkup, a visit for a bad cold or nagging cough is still part of the plan, but so is preventive care and wellness, such as immunizations and scheduled exams like mammograms and prostate screenings.

Healthy patients have always been our goal, but even more so today.

So, we've expanded with four new health centers during the past year and continue to add providers and increase services, including specialty care and easy access to our pharmacy for low-cost prescriptions. We are also engaged in the hospital, directing people to Urgent Care for minor illnesses and to primary care for preventive and chronic care, instead of depending heavily on the emergency room.

And community health centers like Western Sierra Medical are definitely cost-effective solutions. That's one reason we are proud these health centers still receive bipartisan support from our community to Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

Community health centers treated more than 25 million Americans in 2016, generating about \$24 billion in annual health system savings.

It's a health-care system that saves money and provides a healthy economic boost. In fact, for every \$1 in federal funding that community health care centers receive, another \$11 is generated for the local economy.

Health care is a huge industry, accounting for almost 20 percent of the U.S. economy, but Western Sierra's mission will remain the same. Western Sierra's board members, executives and staff will continue to look ahead on how to improve health care and focus on our communities and the well-being of our patients.

Scott McFarland is chief executive officer of Western Sierra Medical Clinic, the largest outpatient provider in Nevada and Sierra counties.