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Community Health Center La Clinica: Playing a Foundational Role in Keeping Our Community Healthy

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Community Health Center La Clinica (health center), a Federally Qualified Health Center with locations in Pasco and Kennewick Washington, has been serving as a primary care services home for Tri-Cities families for over 27 years. Our health center offers Family Practice, Pediatrics, OB/GYN, Urgent Care, Behavioral Health Services, Psychiatric Services, WIC Services, Dental Services and a wide array of enabling services. We employ close to 200 employees and produce over 105,000 patient encounters annually. With an annual operating budget just under \$15 million, our health center serves the entire Tri-Cities geographical area by ensuring anyone in need of

cost-effective, high-quality primary care services has access to such services.

Most recently, our health center was awarded a Federal Increased Demand for Services grant of \$408,000 that we plan to utilize to strengthen our Pediatric and Internal Medicine service lines. Additionally, we were awarded a Federal \$1.1 million Capital Improvement grant which we plan to use to add an additional dental operatory, expand our growing Urgent Care operations and purchase a new practice management system and several pieces of medical equipment to enhance the quality of services we provide. We recently applied for \$7.5 million in Federal Facility Improvement grant dollars and, if awarded, plan to build a new 30,000 sf facility to consolidate our Behavioral Health Services operations, and expand our Call Center, WIC/Community Outreach and Dental Services operations. We have also applied for \$439,000 in federal grant funding to identify and enroll children eligible for Medicaid insurance.

While we are grateful for the grant dollars received to date, as well as those we hope to receive in the near future, it should be noted that these grant dollars are not the sole solution to our funding issues. We also need to push more pay-

ing business through our health center because we anticipate increased utilization of our services and the need to hire more providers. Not an unattainable task, but certainly a challenging one that we see as critical to stabilizing and repositioning our health center for stronger financial viability moving forward.

To keep pace with where the Obama Administration is heading as it relates to holding federally sponsored Programs more accountable, Community Health Center La Clinica is working hard to strengthen our Quality Program. Whether we like it or not, the reality is that we live in a time where Federal and State-sponsored programs are going to be required to quantify the clinical and financial “bang for the buck” the Federal and State governments are getting by investing dollars into health centers. I don’t believe we are far out from the time where Health Centers unable to quantify their Federal and State financial and clinical “bang for the buck” are either placed on funding restrictions or have their funding cut off altogether.

The Community Health Center system, including organizations like Community Health Center La Clinica, have become a vital part of our national healthcare system.

Mary Looker, CEO of the Washington Association of Community and Migrant Health Centers, Washington's Primary Care Association observes, "Federally Qualified Health Centers serve as the nation's primary care catchment system serving over 18 million patients across the nation during 2008. There are roughly 1200 such organizations across the country dedicated to ensuring a growing number of uninsured and under insured have access to affordable, high-quality healthcare." She continues, "Community Health Center La Clinica is one of these organizations on the front lines every day. The face of America's growing uninsured is also changing. Today the face of people utilizing Federally Qualified Health Centers increasingly looks like the face of our families."

Honest, hard-working people who have lost their jobs, lost their health insurance, or who have simply fallen on hard times need systems such as ours to not only survive but

thrive. No longer can or should we say that people who need services from Federally Qualified Health Centers are "those people," for "those people" today represent our families, neighbors and friends. The simplest thing our nation can do to help drive the total cost of healthcare down across the country, is to continue strengthening our nation's Federally Qualified Health Centers and to advocate for more people to be serviced through our health centers. Numerous studies suggest that it is more cost-effective to provide core primary care services in an outpatient primary care arena, as opposed to through extended hospital stays and inappropriate Emergency Room and Urgent Care utilization. It is not a question of whether we are going to pay for healthcare in our nation, but rather what is the most cost-effective way to pay for such care and *how* do we desire to pay for it. Federally Qualified Health Centers already play a piv-

otal primary care services leadership role and are capable of providing an expanded leadership role ensuring our nation's constituents receive the right care, at the right time and in the right treatment platform. We believe that we are moving in the right direction in our mission, goals and vision of where the nation is headed as relates to the healthcare system. Community Health Center La Clinica has always seen their mission as being cutting edge and playing a foundational role in helping to keep their community healthy. It is a mission that has not changed in 27 years.

Carl I. Walters II is the Chief Executive Officer of Community Health System La Clinica in the Tri-Cities area of Washington State. To learn more about Community Health System La Clinica visit www.laclinicanet.org.

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