

You can't call San Francisco 'sicko'

City's universal health care initiative signs up its first applicants in Chinatown

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Ying Fei Feng waited months for Monday to arrive. She'd seen a news story on the local Chinese TV station about San Francisco attempting to become the first city in the nation to provide universal health care to its residents and made a mental note of the program's start date.

The 54-year-old set out from her home the Sunset District, rode Muni all the way across the city and walked into the lobby of North East Medical Services, a nonprofit health care center on the border of North Beach and Chinatown.

She walked past bouquets of brightly colored balloons marking the occasion and into a small office, where she waited her turn to talk to an intake worker. She had a simple question: How do I sign up for Healthy San Francisco?

"Oh, I'm very happy," she said in Cantonese. "I've wanted something like this to happen for a long time. I heard about it in April, and I've been waiting."

So have the city's elected leaders, who in a rare display of unanimity agreed last summer to begin providing health care to all San Franciscans. At a time when the broken state of the health care system is at center stage -- in the race for president in 2008 and at movie theaters where Michael Moore's documentary "Sicko" is filling a lot of seats -- San Francisco is the first city in the country to try to tackle the problem itself.

The initiative, dubbed Healthy San Francisco, aims within 18 months to cover all 82,000 people in the city who lack health insurance. It is opposed by segments of the business community because it demands contributions from employers who don't provide health care coverage to their workers.

It started small on Monday, enrolling 29 people.

Like most people venturing Monday into North East Medical Services or Chinatown Public Health Center -- the two sites pioneering the city's unique foray into universal health care -- Feng didn't have all the documentation she needed to determine whether she qualified.

But Feng, an unemployed wife and mother of two grown daughters, promised she'd be back. She has no health insurance and said she suffers from high cholesterol, lower back pain and neck pain. She said she spends upwards of \$300 a month to see doctors and purchase medication and Chinese herbs to help soothe her pain.

Over at Chinatown Public Health center, three women in blue scrubs were meeting with people to see if they qualified to enroll in the program. They met one-on-one in small offices decorated with posters reading "Eat More Vegetables for Better Health" and "Together We Can Control Tuberculosis."

"We're very busy -- we have a lot of drop-ins today," said Noreen Lum, one of the women determining people's eligibility. "When they first come in, they're full of questions. When I finish the approval, there's a relief. They know they have something concrete."

Phong Tsui, 61, met with Lum and told her she'd become unemployed recently and that her health benefits will run out at the end of July. She didn't have all the necessary paperwork to determine if she qualifies for Healthy San Francisco, but she set an appointment for 11 a.m. today to come back with it.

"I'm not sure if I'm actually eligible at this point. I hope I am," she said in Cantonese through Dr. Albert Yu, who directs the health care center and translated for some members of the media. "If I didn't have high blood pressure, I wouldn't be so concerned."

Down the hall, Sharon Kong helped Yan Huan Mai, 57, determine whether he is eligible. He and his wife are unemployed and in bad health. He has diabetes, which has contributed to vision problems and a limp in one leg. He stood up and hunched his back in an extreme fashion to demonstrate his wife's condition, which wasn't explained. Their son gives them some money each month to buy private health insurance.

"But he has his own family, and I don't want to keep asking," he said in Cantonese. He didn't have all his documentation and said he'd return.

For July and August, just patients who are already seen at North East Medical Services or Chinatown Public Health Center are eligible to enroll. This way, officials at the city's Department of Public Health, which is running the program, can work out logistical problems along the way.

"We want to work through the enrollment procedures, and this is a very finite group we can manage," Yu said.

The first group of participants must earn less than 100 percent of the federal poverty level.

The program is slated to expand in September, opening to low-income patients who are already seen by the public health department or at other city-supported nonprofit community clinics. In January, the city plans to open it up to everybody who lives in San Francisco, is uninsured and doesn't qualify for other government health care programs, such as Medi-Cal. Only adults qualify because children are covered under a separate San Francisco program.

Immigration status, pre-existing conditions and employment status don't matter in enrolling for the program. It is not considered health insurance because it doesn't cover participants when they travel outside city limits. Participants must pay a quarterly premium and co-payments.

Healthy San Francisco is estimated to cost \$200 million a year and will be paid for through a mix of public funds, participants' premiums and co-payments and employer contributions.

The city is mandating that employers who don't currently offer health insurance to their employees contribute to Healthy San Francisco starting Jan. 1. The Golden Gate Restaurant Association has sued to block this component of the program, saying small business owners simply cannot afford it. Both sides are due in federal court Aug. 31.

Mayor Gavin Newsom stopped by Chinatown Public Health Center Monday afternoon to see how the first day of enrollment was going. He held a sample of the membership card participants receive.

"What this card entitles you is the ability to go to the emergency room without risk of financial ruin," he said. "The psychological impact of that is so important. It's profound."

Newsom and Supervisor Tom Ammiano crafted Healthy San Francisco. Ammiano on Monday said he was happy with the first day's progress.

"You always keep your fingers crossed, and it looks like it went without a hitch, so I'm very, very pleased," he said.

Zi Lin, 62, was one of the 29 people to actually enroll in Healthy San Francisco on Monday. A distinguished-looking man with gray hair and glasses and ballpoint pens peeking out of his shirt pocket, he came prepared. He brought stacks of documents, including his driver's license, neatly folded bank statements and even a Bank of the West account register.

He explained that he's used to carting around so much paperwork. He became unemployed in November and now gets all his medical care at San Francisco General Hospital. He suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. He sometimes has to wait two to three hours for a translator -- and always has to show a lot of paperwork to determine how much he owes.

Technically, he had to be a patient at Chinatown Public Health Center to enroll in Healthy San Francisco Monday -- rather than San Francisco General -- but hospital officials made an exception.

"These are case-by-case," Yu said. "We want to meet their needs."

Lin left with a membership card sporting the program's logo -- a silhouette of famous San Francisco landmarks, including the Transamerica building and Coit Tower, with a big white heart in the middle.

Told he was one of the very first participants of this unique program, Lin said, "I'm very happy" in Cantonese. He blushed, and a huge smile spread across his face. It lasted as he walked out of the office, down the center's hallway and out the door.