

**Testimony of the National Nursing Centers Consortium  
Submitted to the Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare  
Regarding Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania**

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On behalf of the members of the National Nursing Centers Consortium (NNCC), I would like to thank Chairman Erickson, and all of the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify about the work that Nurse-Managed Health Centers do to improve access to health care throughout the Commonwealth. My name is Ann Ritter. In my role as Policy and Program Strategist at NNCC, I conduct policy research and advocacy activities on behalf of Nurse-Managed Health Centers and advanced practice nurses who bring much-needed health care services to vulnerable and medically underserved communities in Pennsylvania.

NNCC, established in 1996, is the first and largest association of nurse-managed community-based health centers in the United States. NNCC's membership is comprised of over 200 non-profit health centers throughout the United States, which record approximately 2.5 million client encounters annually. Currently, there are 33 NNCC members in Pennsylvania that record over 200,000 patient encounters annually, making Pennsylvania the national leader in nurse-managed health care. NNCC's mission is to strengthen the capacity, growth, and development of Nurse-Managed Health Centers to provide access to high quality care for vulnerable populations and to eliminate health disparities.

For many of their patients, Nurse-Managed Health Centers represent a lifeline to health care by offering primary care and disease prevention services regardless of patients' ability to pay. Our centers would welcome the opportunity to work with the Commonwealth to improve access to primary and preventive care.

### **Overview of Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania**

Nurse-Managed Health Centers are health centers led by nurses. They are managed by advanced practice nurses (including Certified Registered Nurse Practitioners), and they operate in partnership with the vulnerable communities they serve. Nurse-Managed Health Centers provide a variety of primary care, health promotion, and disease prevention services to patients who are least likely to receive ongoing health care services. This population includes a high percentage of clients who are living in poverty, uninsured, and/or members of racial/ethnic minority groups. A recent evaluation, sponsored by the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and funded through an appropriation provided by Senator Arlen Specter, found that Nurse-Managed Health Centers meet the criteria for safety net providers, as defined by the Institute of Medicine.<sup>1</sup> In short, Nurse-Managed Health Centers are an essential part of the Commonwealth's health care safety net.

Nurse-Managed Health Centers take a comprehensive team-based approach to health care that focuses on providing high-quality clinical services and addressing social or environmental determinants that may influence health outcomes. The nursing profession focuses on building and maintaining medical, social science and behavioral health expertise, and combines that focus with a commitment to counseling, teaching and supporting patients. In Nurse-Managed Health Centers, an interdisciplinary team of advanced practices nurses, public health nurses, social workers, health

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen-Turton, T., Line, L., et. al., *The Nursing Center Model of Health Care For the Underserved*, REPORT TO CENTERS FOR MEDICARE AND MEDICAID SERVICES, 2004.

educators, outreach workers, collaborating physicians and other staff work together to address all patient needs.

### **Services Offered in Nurse-Managed Health Centers**

NNCC members offer a wide variety of services to patients and community members. NNCC members fall into three broad categories: nurse-managed primary care centers; nurse-managed wellness centers; and other nurse-managed health promotion programs.

Nurse-managed primary care centers offer a broad scope of primary care services and can serve as designated primary care providers for patients. In these centers, primary care services may include treatment for acute and chronic illness, routine physical exams, immunizations for adults and children, disease screenings, diagnostic tests, pre-natal care, dental care, drug and alcohol treatment, vision/hearing screenings, and other services. The services provided by these clinics are comparable to those provided by federally-qualified health centers (FQHCs), and some nurse-managed primary care centers in Pennsylvania are part of the FQHC program. Many of these centers also provide innovative health education and disease prevention programs in the community.

Nurse-managed wellness centers serve as crucial entry points into the primary care system for many patients. In nurse-managed wellness centers, nurses provide health screenings, vaccinations, direct nursing care for minor acute problems, health education, and counseling services, all with the goal of improving patients' quality of life. A number of nurse-managed wellness centers in Pennsylvania specifically focus on improving the health of senior citizens to reduce hospitalizations and increase day-to-day independence.

Nurse-managed health promotion programs, such as those run by the Philadelphia Nurse-Family Partnership and the Greater Philadelphia Visiting Nurse Association, provide community-based services designed to improve the lives of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable citizens by

conducting intensive community outreach, often through visits to clients' homes and in-home assessments conducted by nurses and health educators.

In addition to providing clinical services, Nurse-Managed Health Centers provide education, support, outreach and counseling services that are fully integrated into the surrounding community. Nurse-Managed Health Centers offer services like these because the nursing practice model is based on a broad understanding of the kinds of services that fall under the umbrella of "primary health care." This comprehensive approach takes into account not only diagnosis of disease and medication therapies, but also innovative approaches to lifestyle, community and environmental issues that can significantly impact patients' health.

One example of a successful Nurse-Managed Health Center health education and outreach program is the nationally recognized Lead Safe Babies program, which operates out of a number of Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Philadelphia. Through the program, outreach workers and health educators makes home visits to pregnant women and new mothers in Philadelphia and provide them with the necessary education and materials to ensure that their children are never poisoned with lead. Since launching in 2000, Lead Safe Babies has contributed to the reduced rates of lead poisoning in Philadelphia and developed into a national model. In 2005, Lead Safe Babies was recognized as one of only 15 individuals and organizations across the country to receive the Environmental Protection Agency's Children's Environmental Health Excellence Award.

### **Nurse-Managed Health Centers' Role in Nursing Education**

In addition to providing primary care, wellness and health outreach services directly to clients, Nurse-Managed Health Centers also play an important role in nursing education. Most Nurse-Managed Health Centers are affiliated with academic schools of nursing and serve as clinical education and practice sites for nursing students and faculty. In Pennsylvania, Nurse-Managed Health Centers are affiliated with academic nursing education programs at Bloomsburg University,

Community College of Philadelphia, Duquesne University, East Stroudsburg University, Gwynedd-Mercy College, Holy Family University, La Salle University, Messiah College, Millersville University, Neumann College, Pennsylvania State University, Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, and York College of Pennsylvania. Nurse-Managed Health Centers help train the next generation of undergraduate and graduate level nurses by providing a site for hands-on clinical experience to complement classroom curriculum. These centers help train nurses to provide culturally competent care to diverse populations. In addition, by providing a community-based faculty practice site, Nurse-Managed Health Centers can offer unique professional opportunities to nursing faculty members and decrease burn-out rates.

### **Patients Served By Nurse-Managed Health Centers**

Most Nurse-Managed Health Centers provide care to a mixture of low-income adult and pediatric patients. However, some specifically focus on senior or pediatric populations. Other health centers may provide care to specific groups of low-income people, such as homeless individuals or public housing residents.

Nurse-Managed Health Centers have a broad geographic reach in Pennsylvania and can be found in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Although Philadelphia has the most Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania, Nurse-Managed Health Centers can also be found in Allegheny, Bucks, Chester, Dauphin, Delaware, Greene, Lancaster, Montgomery, Northumberland, Monroe, and York counties.

Nurse-Managed Health Centers provide care to patients regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay. If a patient is uninsured or underinsured, the health center will use a sliding fee scale to calculate payment rates. The payor mix for Nurse-Managed Health Centers is comparable to that of

traditional FQHCs. Of the patients seen in Nurse-Managed Health Centers, 40% receive Medicaid, 35% are uninsured, 9% receive Medicare and 17% have commercial health insurance.<sup>2</sup>

### **Quality of Care in Nurse-Managed Health Centers**

Academic research has shown that nurse practitioners are capable of providing high-quality primary care with similar patient outcomes to physicians.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in 2002, a federally-funded demonstration project was conducted to analyze nurse practitioner primary care services in Nurse-Managed Health Centers. Researchers compared select population-based quality measures among Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania and like providers (*e.g.* physician-managed community health centers serving vulnerable populations). The demonstration project found that Nurse-Managed Health Centers experienced higher patient retention rates than like providers, and Nurse-Managed Health Center patients expressed a high level of satisfaction with the care provided.<sup>4</sup> Results also showed that patients who received care from nurse practitioners in Nurse-Managed Health Centers experienced higher rates of generic medication fills and lower hospitalization rates than patients of like providers.<sup>5</sup>

### **Challenges Facing Nurse-Managed Health Centers**

Although Nurse-Managed Health Centers address some of the most pressing issues in public health, they face unique challenges and barriers to sustainability that other community-based health centers do not face.

The fact that many Nurse-Managed Health Centers are affiliated with schools of nursing often prevents them from qualifying for FQHC program funding because they cannot meet program

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> M. Munding, *Primary Care Outcomes in Patients Treated by Nurse Practitioners or Physicians*, JAMA, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> T. Hansen-Turton, *The Nurse-Managed Health Center Safety Net: A Policy Solution to Reducing Health Disparities*, NURSING CLINICS OF N. AMERICA, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

requirements. Most academic Nurse-Managed Health Centers are legally controlled by the Board of Trustees of the school with which they are affiliated. Because of this, academic Nurse-Managed Health Centers cannot ensure that 51% of the health center's board of directors is comprised of community members, as required by the Bureau of Primary Health Care. Even though academic Nurse-Managed Health Centers often have community advisory boards, this is not enough to allow them to qualify for enhanced funding under the FQHC program.

Furthermore, a number of Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania serve pockets of poverty that do not technically fall within a designated medically underserved area or health professions shortage area that would make them eligible for FQHC status. For example, a number of Nurse-Managed Health Centers in the generally affluent counties that make up the Philadelphia suburbs do not qualify for federal health center funding because they are not located in health professions shortage areas (HPSA), and they do not serve federally-recognized medically underserved areas (MUA) or populations (MUP). However, these centers, which are located in relatively affluent communities such as Kennett Square, Lansdale and Glenside, serve a broad population of uninsured and underinsured families, and their services are crucial to the health of low-income people who live and work in predominantly high-income communities.

Another reason Nurse-Managed Health Centers struggle financially is because even though nurse practitioners are legally authorized and qualified to act as primary care providers in Pennsylvania, many managed care organizations have enacted policies which prevent nurse practitioners from performing this function. A recent study conducted by NNCC found that only 53% of managed care organizations around the nation credential nurse practitioners as primary care providers.<sup>6</sup> While this situation appears to be improving slowly, Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania continue to face credentialing and reimbursement challenges – even among

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<sup>6</sup> T. Hansen-Turton, A. Ritter, R. Torgan, *Insurers' Contracting Policies on Nurse Practitioners as Primary Care Providers: Two Years Later*, POLICY, POLITICS & NURSING PRACTICE (forthcoming 2008).

HealthChoices insurers. The lack of adequate reimbursement from managed care organizations contributes to the financial instability of Nurse-Managed Health Centers. Because Nurse-Managed Health Centers serve such a high percentage of uninsured and underinsured patients, barriers to sustainable funding sources such as the ones described above represent an immense challenge to health center directors.

### **Conclusion**

Nurse-Managed Health Centers are a growing movement of innovative safety net health care providers that can help increase access to health care for Pennsylvania residents. Pennsylvania's Nurse-Managed Health Centers serve hundreds of thousands of vulnerable individuals and families in rural, urban, and suburban areas throughout the Commonwealth.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to testify in front of the committee. On behalf of all of the Nurse-Managed Health Centers in Pennsylvania, I thank you for your time and interest in our work to improve the health of vulnerable individuals and families in Pennsylvania.