



Needy lack care in New Orleans

Area short on doctors, beds a year after Katrina

By Liz Szabo
USA TODAY

Nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the city faces a shortage of doctors, nurses and hospital beds for the most vulnerable: the poor, the uninsured and those who are grappling with mental illness and substance abuse.

Though the well-insured can eventually locate a doctor, even if they have to leave the city, patients without resources may miss out on care, says Frederick Cerise, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals.

The loss of health services for the needy is keenly felt in this city, where the storm destroyed thousands of homes and livelihoods and left many people with deep psychological wounds, says Karen De-Salvo, chief of general internal medicine at Tulane University Health Sciences Center.

The five conditions most often diagnosed in the uninsured in 2005 involved mental illnesses and substance abuse, according to a new report from the Louisiana Healthcare Redesign Collaborative, which

A comparison of health care

Doctors willing to treat the poor and uninsured are in shortest supply. Estimated number of doctors available vs. doctors needed:

Type of health care	Available	Needed ¹
Primary-care doctors for Medicaid patients	62	80
Primary-care doctors for the uninsured	14	50
Psychiatrists willing to see Medicaid patients	2.6	8
Psychiatrists willing to see the uninsured	3.7	5
Dentists willing to treat Medicaid patients	11	53

¹ - Full-time equivalents
Source: Louisiana Healthcare Redesign Collaborative

"If you are uninsured and have a broken bone, and it needs surgery, you could be waiting months and months."

— Donald Smithburg of the LSU Health Care Services Division

advises the governor on a plan for the region's medical care.

Although the precise number of health care providers is hard to come by, Cerise says, the New Orleans area may have lost about half of its physicians. Local health care providers also have vacancies for nearly 1,000 nurses, according to the report.

Some open, some closed

Some parts of the region have fared better than others.

Gery Barry, president and CEO of BlueCross BlueShield of Louisiana, says nearly all of its doctors have returned to Jefferson Parish, whose

major hospitals stayed open.

BlueCross has seen a 75% decline, however, in the number of doctors filing claims in harder-hit Orleans Parish, where several of the largest hospitals remain closed, Barry says.

Many doctors have been reluctant to return because their homes and offices were damaged and many of their patients have left, says Kristy Nichols, director of the Health and Hospital department's bureau of primary care and rural health and an author of the new report. According to that study, the population of New Orleans has fallen from more than 1 million people to about 650,000.

Specialists have become especially scarce, says Donald Smithburg, chief executive officer of the Louisiana State University Health Care Services Division.

"If you are uninsured and have a broken bone, and it needs surgery, you could be waiting months and months," he says. "There are so few orthopedists and even fewer who will take the uninsured."

As services have disappeared, the number of needy patients has multiplied, Smithburg says. He estimates that the number of uninsured may have doubled, from about 20% to 40%.

Fewer beds for mentally ill

The mentally ill also have fewer options. The number of psychiatric hospital beds has dropped by 65% since Katrina, from 462 to 164 today, Nichols says. Charity Hospital, which treated many mentally ill patients, has been closed since the hurricane.

Though some mentally ill patients have found treatment in facilities across the state, Smithburg says, others have wound up in emergency rooms or jail.

LSU hopes to reopen 150 beds at the now-closed University Hospital in October. Although officials plan to add 50 trauma beds by the end of the year, University may not add psychiatric beds until next year, Smithburg says.

Cerise says Louisiana is adding 140 psychiatric beds around the state.