

STORY FROM THE FIELD

Jackson County Health Department – Altus, OK

Population Served: 27,000

“If it wasn’t for the health department, I wouldn’t be here,” says Gloria Nieto, breast cancer survivor and mother of three.

When she was diagnosed with cancer six years ago, Nieto, like many people in her community and across the country, fell through the cracks of a patchwork healthcare system. Her work as a nurse’s aide did not provide medical insurance, and as a single mother, Nieto was unable to afford healthcare premiums out of pocket. Furthermore, the ages of Nieto and her children disqualified her from available public programs.

Nieto has seen the consequences of these gaps in coverage. “I have friends who were diagnosed with cancer, but because they didn’t catch it early, they died,” she says. “They were younger than I am now.”

Like many local health departments (LHDs) across the country, the Jackson County Health Department was uniquely positioned to recognize and fill that gap in healthcare coverage. This rural LHD provided preventive care for about 500 people like Nieto each year, including cancer screening and blood tests for diabetes and anemia. A routine mammogram from this program discovered a lump in Nieto’s breast.

The tumor was malignant. Jackson County Health Department staff helped connect Nieto with physicians. Because the cancer was caught at an early stage, treatment was successful.

However, the program that may have saved Nieto’s life is no longer available at Jackson County Health Department. The state of Oklahoma, under severe budget pressures, closed down the program at their location.

Staff of the health department, like coordinating nurse Grace Ruiz, work to connect their patients with other resources, such as similar programs in other parts of the state. However, they are faced with significant barriers including 70-120 mile round trips,

three month waiting lists, and – with increasing frequency – the announcement that funding at other sites has run out.

“Now our patients feel like they have nowhere to go,” says Ruiz. “It’s not a good feeling.”

Her frustration is echoed by Karen Weaver, Administrative Director at Jackson County Health Department. “It’s difficult when you lose a program and you know there’s such a need,” she says.

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Weaver is particularly eager to preserve the safety net of prevention programs like the one that identified Gloria Nieto’s cancer.

“Prevention programs like ours are always worth every dollar you put into them – both in terms of money and impact on the community,” says Weaver. “When cancers are found early through screenings, the treatments are less expensive and the chance of survival is better. Making sure that people have access to preventive services is the right thing to do – economically and morally.”

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