

Exalta Gears Up to Walk Alongside Its Healthy Michigan Plan Patients

In 2014, Michigan expanded Medicaid as part of the Affordable Care Act in what is called the Healthy Michigan Plan. The expansion made health coverage available to a bigger group of people, and at Exalta Health, some 400 patients in the last two years have been part of Healthy Michigan. That's approximately 15% of its patients (and only 15-20% of Exalta Health's patients have any kind of insurance).

That's why changes coming to Healthy Michigan as of January 1, 2020, have Exalta Health social workers gearing up to walk alongside their patients in the coming months.

Legislation passed in 2018 means that next year some Healthy Michigan beneficiaries will be required to tell the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services about either work or activities like a job search, volunteering, undergoing vocational training and more. If they don't report each month, they could lose their health care coverage.

Many in Kent County Will Be Impacted

In Kent County there are approximately 23,000 Healthy Michigan enrollees and estimates are that 13,000, or 56%, will be impacted by the new rules. At Exalta Health it is not yet clear what percentage of its Healthy Michigan patients will be impacted by the new law.

But Exalta Health's Allison Meyaard-Schaap and Rosa Torres know the coming changes will mean lots of worries for a fair number of Exalta Health patients, worries they intend to do whatever they can to alleviate.

Torres, who works for Exalta Health as an AmeriCorps member, fills a variety of critical roles for the organization. She helps with interpretation, works with people on Medicaid concerns, deals with things like food stamps, childcare and diabetes education, recruits patients for nutrition classes and more. The Michigan State graduate, who has an undergrad degree in biomedical lab science and a master's degree in public health, had originally signed on to be with Exalta Health for a year but liked it so well, she continued her contract for an extra six months, and now will be with the organization until next spring.

Meyaard-Schaap is also a former AmeriCorps member and has a bachelor's degree in Spanish from Calvin and a master's in social work from Michigan. She began at Exalta Health in March 2019 and is one of three social workers on staff, joining Hannah Stegink and Ken VanBeek in that capacity.

Exalta Health Staff Busy Getting Up-to-speed

Both Meyaard-Schaap and Torres have been busy getting up-to-speed on the Healthy Michigan plan's new reporting requirements and what those might mean for 400 or so Exalta Health patients.

"There were a lot of questions (when the law was passed) about whether this might go to the courts, might get reversed," says Meyaard-Schaap, "so initially we were just following it and keeping an eye on things. When it became clear that this (new reporting requirement) was going to go into effect, we quickly started working to understand it and how it was going to impact our patients so we could walk alongside them and be a resource for them."

Torres has already taken part in several webinars and trainings, and on Wednesday, November 6 she and Meyaard-Schaap attended a regional information forum at Grand Valley's downtown campus to learn more about what's coming.

Still Lots of Uncertainty

Both Torres and Meyaard-Schaap say there still seems to be a lot of uncertainty around the new reporting requirements.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services is contacting Healthy Michigan plan recipients by mail if they will need to meet the new work requirements. Exalta Health patients should have received letters in September and October, but very few have discussed it with Exalta Health employees. Some patients have received it in English, added Torres, but speak only Spanish and simply don't know what to do with the information.

That's where Exalta Health comes in.

"Our biggest concern," says Torres, "is that there are patients who don't understand what is going on."

That's why, over the next few weeks and months, Exalta Health plans to run lists of all of its Healthy Michigan plan patients and get proactive with reaching those patients. For example, one plan is to cross reference the list with upcoming patient appointments and make sure that any Healthy Michigan plan patients with upcoming appointments are counseled at the time of their visit about the new requirements. Torres and Meyaard-Schaap also plan to do staff education with the entire Exalta Health staff at upcoming staff meetings and gatherings.

Walking Alongside People

Torres plans to be as hands-on with patients as they would like her to be, helping them apply for exemptions, fill out necessary forms and whatever else will assist them in their healthcare journey.

"This is an opportunity for us to walk alongside people," says Meyaard-Schaap, "a way for us to help them keep health insurance that they need. So, we're going to do everything we need to do so that we can do everything we can for our patients."