

# Health officials get taste of life without insurance coverage

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By Shantell M. Kirkendoll

FLINT, MI - Norma Hagenow found it hard to be a pregnant 20-year-old with a toothache and without health insurance.

"It was horrific," she said of the experience of losing her job because she took too many sick days and had to wait a month for a charity dental appointment.

Fortunately for Hagenow, she is the president of Genesys Regional Medical Center in real life.

She was among more than 70 health officials and policy makers who were made to face the hurdles experienced by the 60,000 Genesee County residents without health insurance in the Walk in My Shoes simulation for Cover the Uninsured Week.

From dismissive pharmacists to waits at government assistance offices, participants got a look at life without the safety net of health insurance.

"For me, it was the lack of good customer service," said Dale Weighill, director of the Resource Center, who role-played a 79-year-old with high blood pressure. "When they told me they couldn't help me, they didn't tell me where I could go."

The four-week-long simulation was designed to inspire health organizations to consider ways their systems could be better designed to keep in mind multiple paperwork hurdles, non-English speakers or transportation issues.

"They often hear about it, but today we wanted them to experience it," said Marcy Buren, director of Health Access, which hosted the event at First Presbyterian Church.

Deborah Manns, of the Hamilton Health Network, played a 63-year-old grandmother who had to decide who should get health care first, herself or her grandchildren - a depressed 13-year-old, a 4-year-old with asthma or a 6-month-old with hearing trouble.

## QUICK TAKE

Health aid offered

- Health Access, 1423 W. Court St., is the host of the Cover the Uninsured Week events and a clearinghouse of information on health insurance and prescription coverage. It also can help people without insurance. Details: (810) 232-4200.

"Some of the experiences are heightened, but they are based on reality that as things pile up, financial stability tumbles," said Deborah Katz of Community Catalyst, a Boston-based consumer health organization that led the simulation.

Tonya Rak, children's activity coordinator for Shelter of Flint, said she saw Friday, after being mistakenly "billed" \$1,400, what many of the shelter's clients go through.

Beyond the expense and time of a run-around to find her son's X-rays in the simulation, Libby Richards, communications and administrative projects manager at Mott Children's Health Center, said she saw the psychological downfall that can contribute to missed appointments and not following up on phone calls.

"If you don't get angry, then you get depressed and passive," Richards said. "You get so affected, you give up."

Clients can put up a wall after facing so many barriers, said Jodie Journey, health coordinator at Beecher Head Start.

"I've wondered why there's so much resentment, thinking all the while it was displaced," Journey said. "I see why people sometimes snap for being asked to do another thing."

"Thanks for this experience. It explains a lot."