

New Grant Aims To Reduce Emergency Department Over-Utilization in Park County

LIVINGSTON – Community Health Partners (CHP), a Livingston-based community health center, received a \$93,000 grant from the Montana Healthcare Foundation to reduce the number of patients who frequently use the emergency department as their regular source of healthcare. The grant partners also include the Park County Health Department, Livingston HealthCare and the Park County Mental Health Center. The grant, funded for two years, created a new partnership called the Park County Connect Program.

Patients who use the hospital emergency department (ED) on a regular basis (often defined as 3-6 visits during a six-month period) may not be receiving the care they need. Many of these patients face complex health problems, which may include both chronic physical illnesses, mental illness and drug or alcohol dependence. Because emergency departments are set up for episodic emergent care, they do not provide the full range of services that are needed to help these individuals improve and stabilize their health over the long term. In addition, emergency departments are among the most expensive entry points into the healthcare system, so visits to the ED for problems that might be better served in other settings can be costly to communities.

“We are excited to partner with the other Park County organizations that can help attend to this issue and create a true system to ensure we can identify and reach out to community members who many need help navigating the complex healthcare system in a more productive way,” said Lander Cooney, CHP’s chief executive officer. “We are pleased the Montana Healthcare Foundation recognized the importance of this project as we hope it can be replicated in other Montana communities.”

The grant will place a social worker in the Park County Health Department who will design a community-based outreach program to benefit both current high-utilizer patients as well as those who may also be at risk in Park County. Interventions within this program may include home visits, education and referrals to other support agencies, and will work closely with patients to connect them to a primary care provider in their community.

“This program is a win-win for both patients and the community by connecting patients with the care they need,” said Bren Lowe, Livingston HealthCare’s chief executive officer.

Partners will monitor data on a regular basis to determine if the interventions are making a difference and hope to have a model that is easy to implement in other areas of Montana. Using the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s “County Rankings and Roadmaps,” compared to top performing US counties, in 2014 Park County had double the rate of residents reporting fair or poor health, 50% more preventable hospital stays and 40% more poor mental health days.

“It is great to see a county health department, a hospital, a community health center, and a mental health center working together to address the needs of some of the most vulnerable members of their community,” said Dr. Aaron Wernham, CEO of the Montana Healthcare Foundation. “We hope Park County Connect will demonstrate an innovative way to address a costly problem that affects every community in Montana.”

###