The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) announced a major grant to Eau Claire Cooperative Health Center (ECCHC) to expand primary health care services to low income and homeless people in Richland, Lexington, Fairfield and Newberry Counties. The grant, which is renewable, will provide $2.2 million per year for three years for a total of $6.6 million.

The new grant will allow ECCHC to expand the number of patients served from 41,000 per year to 50,000 within the next twelve months.

The $6.6 million grant over the next 3 years will go along way in expanding an effort that originally focused on needy children.

"It's grown exponentially as the needs have become known and our resources have grown to match them," said Dr. Stuart Hamilton with the Eau Claire Cooperative Health Center.

Key community partners - including regional hospitals, United Way of the Midlands and the Homeless Coalition, First Steps of Richland County and many others participated in the planning and wrote letters of commitment to making the expansion a success. In addition to organizations, ECCHC conducted focus groups to explore how best to reduce barriers to access to care.
The result of the input from experts, organizations and low-income citizens is a step closer to patient-centered care in the Midlands. Key changes to make access easier will include: Evening and Saturday hours at numerous locations so that working poor will not have to choose between work and seeing their doctor. For the homeless, health care services will be embedded in homeless shelters and transitional housing.

Other smart innovations include expanded use of nurse practitioners to provide the primary care services. Expansion of the limited regional behavioral resources will help address a burgeoning need. These services will be located in geographies where the needs are the greatest.

The benefits to society are significant. Extended hours and days will reduce costly and inappropriate ER visits that drive up health care costs. Cost efficiencies of spreading administrative costs over more patients which reduces the cost of care, allowing more patients to be served.

ECCHC, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) that is defined as an independent, non-profit organization authorized under Section 330 of the Public Health Act to receive Federal grant funds

FQHCs or Community Health Centers are charged with providing services in medically underserved areas or serve medically underserved populations. Services must be offered on a sliding scale fee and must include both primary and preventive care.

In a time of increased focus on accountability, all FQHCs must adhere to stringent clinical and fiscal quality standards and evidence-based medical protocols.

Within the state of South Carolina, ECCHC provides more patient visits than any of the other 20+ Community Health Centers. It ranks number two in the state in unduplicated patients.

ECCHC works closely with hospitals, insurers, United Way of the Midlands, school districts,
universities, county councils and many others to understand and meet needs of the highest risk populations. Many of the organizations provide grants to support the work of ECCHC.

The new funding is an affirmation of the performance of the organization due, in no small part, to enduring and purposeful partnerships.