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Stimulus funds for health centers, job training

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Tuesday, June 30, 2009

More than \$109 million in grants will be doled out to health centers for low-income people in California and \$10 million more will be devoted to training poor and at-risk youth for green-energy jobs as part of the latest round of federal stimulus funding announced Monday.

The funds, provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act signed in February by President Obama, offered a bright spot at a time of mostly bad news about a poor economy and deep state budget cuts.

The health grants, which will be available to about 500 community clinics statewide, are designed to help the centers buy equipment, improve clinic facilities, and adopt or expand the use of health information technology and electronic health records.

Representatives of California's community health centers praised the administration for recognizing the importance of safety-net clinics but expressed concern that the state's budget crisis could wipe out some of the benefits of the new funds.

"Obama recognizes clinics are seeing this overwhelming increase in the uninsured because people are losing their jobs in this economy," said Chris Patterson, spokesman for the California Primary Care Association, which represents about 800 health centers statewide.

But California's health services face the elimination of coverage for more than 900,000 low-income children as well as the loss of other programs. On Wednesday, adults on Medi-Cal will lose their dental coverage.

"The state budget cuts are mitigating a lot of the positive (effect of) the federal dollars we're seeing," Patterson said.

This is the third set of health grants provided through stimulus funds. California centers have already received \$63 million in funds.

The latest round of health grants, totaling \$851 million nationwide, is available to as many as 1,500 centers around the country. These are centers that are federally qualified to receive higher reimbursement rates in exchange for treating all patients, regardless of ability to pay.

The jobs training funds will go to 11 programs in California - four in the Bay Area - which will receive \$10 million to prepare youths for jobs such as solar panel repair, water treatment and home energy auditing. The money will be matched by each of the recipient schools where the training will take place.

The four institutions in the Bay Area receiving \$930,000 to \$940,000 each to establish what are being called green jobs pilot programs are: City College of San Francisco, Evergreen Community College District in San Jose, Peralta Community College District in Alameda County and San Mateo County's Workforce Investment Board.

City College of San Francisco, which will receive just over \$930,000, was facing the prospect of slashing 800 of 9,800 classes due to financial woes.

"This money is definitely coming at a good time," said John Rizzo, a member of the board of trustees at City College of San Francisco. "This doesn't fill our \$25 million deficit, or the math classes we're losing, but it's significant."

Rizzo said City College's program would likely begin in spring and consist of six-week-courses focusing on renewable energy and water efficiency equipment.

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