

'We can do better' in health care delivery, says CEO at Oregon Leadership Summit

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By Elizabeth Hayes

Even with Oregon's success in increasing the health insurance rate to 95 percent, now is not the time to rest on our laurels, the CEO of the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center told attendees at the 16th annual Oregon Leadership Summit on Monday.

"We have a lot to be proud of, but Oregon still faces many challenges," Gill Munoz said.

The latest United Health Foundation rankings of healthiest states placed Oregon at No. 20, basically the middle of the pack. Diabetes and hypertension are "increasing the burden on individuals and families," Munoz said.

"It's not time to fall back on short-sighted formulas of cutting benefits or eligibility" for Medicaid, he said. "We don't need pockets of health but healthy communities across the entire state. We need all sectors of the economy to come together to raise us to the next level."

He called on business leaders to follow his organization's lead, as it turned a tragedy into a means of boosting the health of the community.

The health center was founded by community members in a three-car garage in Cornelius after six-year-old Virginia Garcia died from a treatable wound. Virginia Garcia had traveled to the area from Texas in 1975 with her parents, who were farm workers. The child cut her foot along the way and the infection turned fatal.

Today, the clinic provides health care services to 45,000 patients a year in Washington and Yamhill counties, 60 percent of whom are on the Oregon Health Plan, the state's version of Medicaid. Munoz said Virginia Garcia providers try to individualize their treatment, to the point of looking through a client's cupboards for high-salt foods to help devise a low-sodium diet to combat her high blood pressure.

The state must continue to identify those facing barriers to care, he said.

"Who are the Virginia Garcias of today?" Munoz said. "Is it the man struggling with mental health and addictions living in our parks? The refugee traumatized by war and violence? A family living in their car? What are those intolerable conditions to which we're becoming immune? Do we have kids growing up thinking campsites on the highway and people asking for handouts is normal? How do we ensure access to care regardless of background? We can do better."

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