



Cook County Board of Commissioners Budget Hearing 10/20/2020

Testimony of Carmen Vergara, RN, MPH
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My name is Carmen Vergara, I am a Registered Nurse and serve as the COO of Esperanza Health Centers, a Federally Qualified Health Center serving Chicago's West and Southwest Sides. I am writing to offer my support of the CountyCare health plan and the important funding allocated to the Cook County Health system.

Esperanza is one of 14 safety-net providers that comprise the MHN ACO, an accountable care organization that works closely with CountyCare. Our MHN ACO organization is owned by 11 Federally Qualified Health Centers and 3 Health Systems, spanning Cook County.

At our each of our four locations, located in what have been medically under-resourced and predominantly Latino communities, Esperanza delivers culturally appropriate primary care that is close to home. Our relationship with CCH, CountyCare, and the MHN ACO has been a catalyst to advancing our mission and to better serving our community. Over the course of our 7-year partnership, Esperanza has worked tirelessly to advance our comprehensive care model and today Esperanza is a national leader in healthcare quality, having earned a prestigious National Quality Leader Award from the Health Resources and Services Administration for the fourth time this year since 2016.

I have seen our communities grow and change. I grew up in Little Village and now have the privilege to continue to work in the area, and more importantly, to see the impact our work has on health outcomes in our community. At Esperanza, we deliver compassionate, quality care every day to patients who are ineligible for health care coverage, in many cases, these individuals rely on the excellent team at CCH for any specialty needs we cannot meet in the primary care setting. These services are truly life-saving.

Esperanza also serves almost 9,000 patients that are beneficiaries of the CountyCare health plan. These individuals from our community, rely on the CountyCare health plan for coverage and the dignity that comes with access. In many ways, CountyCare is the most progressive Medicaid insurance plan in the State and the one that is making the greatest impact on improving the relationship between patients and primary care – improving outcomes and reducing the cost of care. Through our partnership with CountyCare and MHN ACO, Esperanza has advanced patient care through practice level programming. As an RN, I have worked with patients firsthand that are looking for guidance, support, and someone who will listen to their concerns

and accommodate their unique needs. From families with Asthma concerned about the COVID-19 crisis, to patients requiring emergency care after serious accidents, I have had the privilege of working with CountyCare patients to connect them to the right care at the right place—and to work with them to get the resources they need and deserve. This dignity is one of the primary successes of CountyCare and it ties perfectly to our mission which is to deliver health and hope for Chicago's often overlooked communities.

Together, through our work with the MHN ACO, we have made great strides in improving the relationship between patients and primary care, improving outcomes, and reducing the overall costs of patient care. Through our partnership in MHN ACO, Esperanza has contributed to the approx. \$50million in earned savings, shared between the health plan and the ACO providers. This model also promotes strong patient relationships; today, MHN ACO has 34% more primary care visits and 24% higher member retention than the rest of the CountyCare health plan. Together, we are leading the charge in transforming into a system that works for our shared service population.

As a leader who has also put in the work, I can see the patient outcomes as a result of the relationships care teams are developing with their patients – and I have been able to build programs and processes that better serve our patients. Thanks to CountyCare, Esperanza has been able to embark on true journey to Practice Transformation – better serving our patients and our community.

I'd like to close with a patient story that exemplifies the value of the partnership between Esperanza and the CCH system. J, a 40 y/o patient with County Care, was diagnosed with HIV in February. His Esperanza care team promptly referred him to the CORE Center for treatment, but in April, he lost stable housing after a conflict with his partner. As the city responded to the global pandemic, and many services became difficult to access, J did not have a safe place to stay and was struggling with limited cellphone service. Stefany Campos, J's Care Manager, responded with thoughtful outreach and helped J sign up for a free phone, and coordinated efforts between care teams at Esperanza and the CORE Center. J was connected with safe housing and meals during the pandemic and has been able to continue his treatment and regular care through telehealth and in person visits at CORE and Esperanza. County Care and the CCH system made that possible.

We at Esperanza are grateful for this transformative partnership and to the commissioners of Cook County for seeing the value of our partnership and of the CountyCare plan.

Sincerely,



Carmen Vergara, RN, MPH
Chief Operating Officer
Esperanza Health Centers