

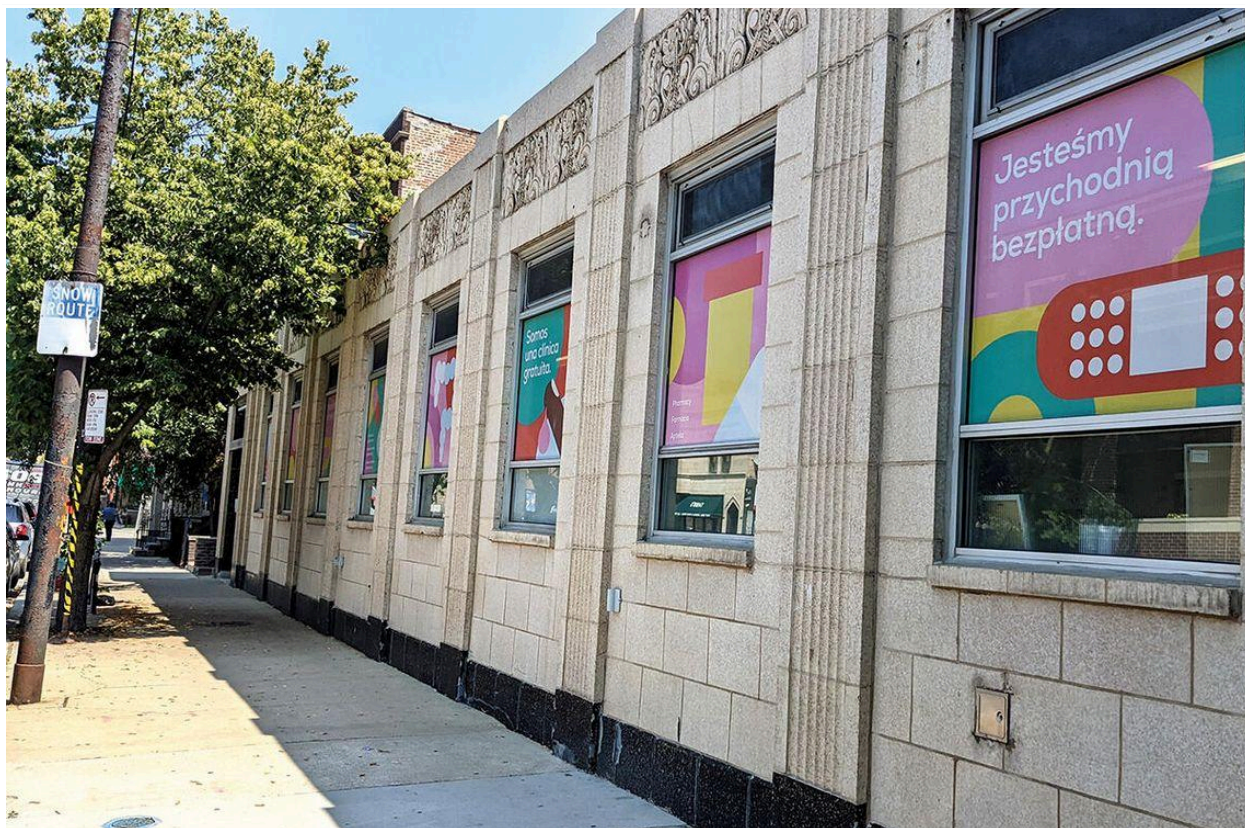
DZIENNIK ZWIĄZKOWY

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Polish patients of a free clinic in Chicago neglect visits for fear of deportation

Patients at Chicago's free clinic for the uninsured are canceling appointments or switching to telephone appointments in fear of deportation, due to President Trump's tighter immigration policy. Executives at CommunityHealth, which has served primarily Hispanic and Polish patients for more than 30 years, are concerned that this could adversely affect the health of Chicago's immigrant communities.



Clinic

Author: Joanna Marszałek

The waiting room of CommunityHealth's free uninsured clinic, at 2611 W. Chicago Ave. in the Ukrainian Village area, is generally filled with patients. However, in recent weeks, staff have noticed more people have canceled appointments or switched to telephone consultations.

The changes began after President Trump took power, announcing mass deportations in the Chicago area, among others. While there is no indication that deportations in Chicago have been massive, the fear of roundups has reverberated widely in immigrant communities across Chicago.

"One Polish patient who had been using the clinic's care for years left a message on my phone, saying she changed her personal visit to the doctor for a telephone consultation. She explained it in one sentence: "you know how it is," reports Marzena Zagata, coordinator for health care and contact with the community.

"According to the clinic's management, in the first weeks after the new administration took power, about 30 percent of patients did not show up for their appointments. This applies to both Latino and Polish patients," says Zagata.



Polish CommunityHealth employees, Marzena Zagata and Elżbieta Czerwonka, photo: CommunityHealth

The Polish coordinator tells us that the long-awaited educational sessions on diabetes for Polish-speaking patients are to take place in the spring.

"Unfortunately, given the current situation, we predict that the interest may be lower. We are considering the option of conducting online classes or providing patients with materials for self-learning at home," says Zagata.

Telephone visits and virtual educational programs may be a temporary solution, but they will not replace face-to-face contact with the patient, according to Zagata. This is particularly important in the case of collecting medicine from free pharmacy services offered at the clinic.

According to Zagata, diabetes and hypertension are common ailments in the Polish community. For uninsured patients who have neglected health care for years, the diagnosis is often made on the first visit.

"Many of our patients have spent their "healthiest" years without the need for regular visits to the doctor, which is why they often come to our clinic already with chronic diseases such as diabetes or hypertension. For this reason, educational programs in our clinic are an essential and crucial part of healthcare. Although a lot of information can be found on the Internet today, not all of our patients have access to the Internet, and some do not even have modern devices such as smartphones," Zagata says.

While CommunityHealth does not check the immigration status of its patients, it is no secret that a large proportion of them are undocumented. The criteria for admission to the clinic are that you have no health insurance and that you meet an income requirement (you must not exceed 300 percent of the federal poverty threshold).

On President Trump's first full day in office, the federal government lifted restrictions on the activities of immigration services (ICE and CBP) in places considered "sensitive," such as hospitals, clinics, shelters, churches, and schools.

In the face of patients' uncertainty about visiting the clinic, she introduced her own precautions. Among them is training employees on how to behave in the event of a possible visit by federal agents. All people entering the clinic are verified. Patients were notified by text messages about the option of changing their appointment to a telephone appointment, and assured of the protection of their personal and health data. Since the clinic is not funded by government money, it is not obliged to cooperate with federal authorities.

CommunityHealth is one of the largest free volunteer-based clinics in the entire country. CommunityHealth has about a thousand volunteers and 45 full-time employees. It

admits about 4 thousand patients a year. The clinic is 95 percent financed by private donors.

Since its inception in 1993, with the help of donors and volunteers, the clinic has grown to three locations (two additional mini locations operate in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood: 5,413 W. Diversey Ave. and Little Village: 2,759 S. Harding Ave.) that see patients 6 days a week.

The majority of CommunityHealth patients are Hispanic. The number of Polish patients has decreased in recent years, but they still account for about 20 percent of those receiving care. Polish patients are guaranteed the assistance of an interpreter. The clinic also has Polish-speaking staff, and many educational materials are available in Polish.

According to Zagata, over the past two years, CommunityHealth has provided care to about 600 Polish-speaking patients.

"We want our compatriots to know that the clinic is still functioning, it is still free of charge, it still accepts Polish patients, regardless of their place of residence, and it still offers comprehensive health care," concludes Zagata.

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