

Providers talk about challenges for migrant workers

By Jessica Kutz, Staff Reporter | Posted: Friday, October 21, 2016 5:59 pm

The difficulties of healthcare are far-reaching for undocumented workers, and perhaps even more so in rural areas. The issue was one of the main topics of discussion at the presentation “Equity at the Intersection of Poverty, Migration and Health,” held Thursday night at Wilkinson Public Library.

The Tri-County Health Network, a grantee of The Colorado Trust, a health equity foundation based out of Denver, hosted the event, the first of a four-part series titled the Health Equity Learning Series. Employees from the Tri-County Health Network and the San Miguel Resource Center were in attendance.

Rasa Kaunelis, director of strategic initiatives for Tri-County Health, feels that talks around health equity are important for San Miguel County.

“We are a very rural region and isolation can really impact the daily lives of our residents.” She added, “We have a lot of low-income families, and Spanish-speaking families, and we think it is important that we talk about the barriers those folks face to help us reach solutions.”

In a pre-recorded talk, the speaker, Deliana Garcia, director of International Projects, Research and Development for the Migrant Clinicians Network, addressed issues that healthcare providers face when treating undocumented workers. The issues include a lack of continuous care due to the migratory nature of work that undocumented migrants often pursue, and language and cultural barriers they may face when accessing care.

According to Stacey Wright, programs manager for Tri-County Health in Telluride, “We have a very high population of migrant workers.” She said they do not all live here, but many travel to Telluride for work opportunities in construction or at the hotels in town.

For Wright, and others at the event, one of the main issues discussed after the talk was the challenge in providing access to healthcare in rural areas due to a lack of resources, especially translation services. Wright said that Tri-County Health “literally hires Spanish speakers from Montrose to come down to Telluride to help with translation services.”

Hannah Wilson, a community health worker with Tri-County Health, added that on her visits she sometimes has to resort to family members for translations. “If I were to screen somebody and they don’t speak any English I would have to get connected by one of their children ... and use that as a source of translating,” she said.

Another issue that undocumented migrants face is access to healthcare. According to Wright, there are no coverage options for undocumented migrants in Telluride. “To be covered under the Affordable Care Act, you have to be documented,” Wright said.

Undocumented migrants have to pay for treatments based on “a sliding-fee scale, where you go in and

talk to a provider about your income and based on your income they decided how much you can pay,” Wright said. The most affordable pricing is usually at the Uncompahgre Medical Center in Norwood, located 30 miles away from Telluride, she said.

Often, Wright explained, those who live and work here legally do not enroll in insurance out of fear for family members who aren’t documented, Wright explained.

“When you have one half of a family who is documented, and the other half is undocumented, people are afraid to enroll because they are worried this highlights that their family members are undocumented,” she said.

The second part of the Health Equity Learning Series will be offered in Ridgway at a date to be determined.