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Lillian Morales receives a physical examination March 20 from Rita D'Aoust, a nurse practitioner at St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center in Rochester. The center treats patients who do not have health insurance.

No insurance, no assurance

Catholic leaders decry millions lacking coverage

Having one's blood pressure taken at a public-health screening may mean the difference between health and illness — for the individual as well as for the health system in general, according to Denis Sweeney, director of marketing and development at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira.

If the test indicates the need for physician follow-up, the individual can be routed into preventive care, which may forestall ailments resulting from lack of treatment, Sweeney noted.

However, increasing numbers of people are checking into St. Joseph's long after they should have seen a doctor, he said. He added that many of these patients

cannot afford health insurance.

Three million New York residents under age 65 — or one out of five — have no health insurance, according to the New York State Health Care Campaign, an Albany-based coalition of more than 80 organizations. Yet Sweeney asserted that "even one person being uninsured is one person too many because that could be a person with potential long-term medical problems."

And hospitals like St. Joseph's pay a price for such a patient, he added, noting that between 2000 and 2002, the annual amount of revenue the hospital lost to unpaid medical bills increased from \$3 million to \$4 million per year. This has forced St. Joseph's to cut services, including public-health screenings, Sweeney said. The cuts create a cycle of fewer preventive health-care measures being taken, result-

ing in more people waiting until treatment of their ailments becomes overwhelmingly necessary — and expensive.

Sweeney cited studies showing that as health-insurance premiums rise in cost, more and more small businesses are considering dropping employee health plans altogether. One such study, cited in a health-care access fact sheet produced by the Diocese of Rochester, indicated that many small firms face annual premium increases of 20 percent or more over the next two years. If they don't drop coverage altogether, many such firms are likely to increase the share of premium an employee must pay. More information on the topic can be found at www.coveringtheuninsured.org.

"The uninsured (population) has to be a major priority of all our elected officials

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Story by Rob Cullivan • Photo by Karin von Voigtlander

