

OPINION

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YOUR TURN

Access to health care is vital

At age 49, Sharon Coleman was uninsured and had just been diagnosed with diabetes. On the advice of a long-time friend, Sharon sought care at East Texas Community Health Services (ETCHS). That was in 1993. Working with her health care team at ETCHS, she reduced her blood sugar levels and lost 125 pounds. Now, at age 71, the rural San Augustine County resident has a much easier time working multiple jobs to support her family and has been raising her 14-year-old granddaughter for the past two years.

But Sharon's access to care is threatened. Without action by Congress, health centers like ETCHS across the country face a 70 percent reduction in federal support set to expire on Oct. 1, 2015. We call this the Health Center Funding Cliff.

In ETCHS's six-county service area, this could mean nearly 3,000 people losing access to affordable, quality primary and preventive care. Think about cutting your household budget by 70 percent! We will be put in the excruciating position of choosing which services and staff to cut.

There is a clear path. Last month, an overwhelming bipartisan majority in the U.S. House recognized the important role health centers play in their communities and passed HR 2, which makes crucial investments in health centers.

When Congress reconvenes this week, the Senate is expected to consider HR 2 as early as Monday or Tuesday. Sen. John Cornyn already signed onto a key letter to Senate leadership supporting health centers such as ETCHS. We need the same level of commitment from Sen. Ted Cruz.

You see, health centers are different from any other health care providers. We ensure that patients like Sharon have access to care no matter their insurance status or ability to pay. We offer sliding scale fees for our uninsured patients.

If you believe that access to health care is important for our community, here's what I need you to do. On Monday, call Sen. Cruz's office using

this toll-free number (866) 456-3949 and ask him to support funding for community health centers through HR 2.

Bob Choate, Ph.D.

Board chair

*East Texas Community
Health Services*