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## **MORE PALM BEACH COUNTY RESIDENTS NOW ELIGIBLE FOR AFFORDABLE HEALTH COVERAGE**

WEST PALM BEACH, FLORIDA, July 9, 2008 – By a unanimous vote of the Board, the Health Care District of Palm Beach County approved a plan to provide universal health coverage for low-income residents who earn less than 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Vita Health is a shared-cost program that provides affordable, quality health coverage to residents who pay as little as \$25 a month. The remaining two-thirds of the monthly premium are covered by the Health Care District. In May of this year the Florida State Legislature passed a health coverage bill that raised the income eligibility for Health Flex programs, including Vita Health, to 300 percent of the FPL. The decision by the Health Care District Board, effective October 1<sup>st</sup>, increases the allowable income levels to \$31,200 annually for an individual living in Palm Beach County and \$63,600 for a family of four.

“This will help us cover more residents who are not able to afford health coverage when their employer doesn’t provide it,” said Dr. Stanley Pierce, Health Care District Board member.

“There are a lot of people in Palm Beach County who have no health coverage. This is what the Health Care District is all about, improving access to healthcare services,” said Dr. Effie C. Gear, Health Care District Board Vice-Chair.

Vita Health is designed for working individuals and families in Palm Beach County, including uninsured single parents, individuals whose employers do not offer health benefits for full and part-time employees and residents who are self-employed. It’s an affordable, quality health coverage option for residents who want the peace of mind of knowing that they can access health care if they need it.

“Since the Health Care District was established by the voters nearly two decades ago, providing

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safety net health coverage for Palm Beach County residents has been one of our core missions. Vita Health provides the public an opportunity to purchase affordable health coverage because costs are shared by the Health Care District. This translates into more benefits for less cost,” says Jonathan Satter, Health Care District Board Chair. “By expanding the income level for Vita Health, the Health Care District continues to expand the number of Palm Beach County residents who have access to important health care services.”

With a network of primary and specialty physicians throughout Palm Beach County, Vita Health provides inpatient acute care, emergency room services, outpatient surgery, diagnostic services, primary care services, physician services, and prescription drugs. The program improves health through a focus on wellness, affording access to primary and preventive health care services and providing members with a medical home.

To be eligible, residents must be between the ages of 1 and 65, uninsured during the preceding six months, and meet the income criteria. The monthly premiums range from \$25 to \$100 per individual with co-payments as low as \$5 per office visit.

“Over the last year we have partnered with the Economic Council of Palm Beach County to promote Vita Health. As a result, the membership has more than doubled,” said Debi Gavras, Core Operations Officer of the Health Care District who oversees its Managed Care programs. “By expanding the income level, Vita Health will continue to grow. This will result in even more residents with a medical home, and in turn reduce the level of uncompensated care, emergency room overcrowding, and avoid more expensive care due to delayed healthcare access.”

Last month the National Association of Public Hospitals presented Vita Health with a special recognition for “community engagement” at the organization’s annual Safety Net awards ceremony.

In Palm Beach County, health care providers absorb substantial costs for uninsured patients who present for care. Vita Health members visit an ER at a lower rate (12/1000 members) compared to the Medicaid HMO population in the county (38/1000 members). The program also encourages timely preventive care. A recent Florida health insurance study found that half of the uninsured either delay or simply don’t get needed medical care, due to lack of coverage

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and cost. Nine of the top ten reasons Vita Health members visited their primary care physicians were related to preventive care services.

“Providing solutions for the uninsured is a complex challenge and one that the Health Care District has made a priority for more than fifteen years, said Health Care District’s Chief Executive Officer, Dwight D. Chenette, MBA, MPH. “The number of uninsured in Palm Beach County is estimated at more than 150,000. More than half of the uninsured have been without coverage for longer than a year, and nearly one in five have never had coverage. The primary reason is cost. Vita Health provides an opportunity for residents to obtain affordable health coverage.”

The Health Care District funds or administers health coverage for SCHIP, Medicaid, and several health initiatives designed for targeted populations. The Health Care District also serves the community through a maternity care program as well as a nationally acclaimed Trauma System, a network of pharmacies, a rehabilitation and skilled-nursing center, and a dedicated nurse in more than 170 public schools. The District owns and operates the county’s only public hospital, Glades General Hospital, and is in the process of building a new regional hospital, scheduled to open in early 2010, that will serve the Western Palm Beach County communities bordering Lake Okeechobee.

For more information about the Vita Health program, visit [www.vitahealth.org](http://www.vitahealth.org).

***About the Health Care District:*** *The Health Care District of Palm Beach County provides health coverage for low-income residents, a nationally acclaimed trauma system, clinics with a dedicated nurse in more than 170 public schools, a pharmacy network, behavioral health professionals in 46 public elementary schools, a long-term skilled nursing and rehabilitation center, and acute care hospital services at Glades General Hospital, the county’s only public hospital. The Health Care District is in the process of constructing a new, technologically-advanced regional hospital to serve the Lake Okeechobee region.*

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