



# The Economic Recession and Nonprofit Safety-Net Health Centers and Clinics in the United States

## *Nationwide Survey of Patient Volume January-June 2009 compared to 2008: Overall Patients and Patients with Diabetes*

**Purpose:** The purpose of this survey was to determine whether and to what extent nonprofit safety-net clinic and health center providers in the United States were experiencing an increase in the number of overall patients during the first six months of 2009 compared to the similar period in 2008 and, more specifically, a change in the number of patients with diabetes.

The intended application of the survey was to inform assistance efforts through the Direct Relief USA program, which provides prescription medications and supplies for low-income, uninsured patients at nonprofit safety-net facilities.

**Background:** Anecdotal evidence in various press reports over the first six months of 2009, and experience through Direct Relief USA, indicated that the economic recession and concurrent job losses were causing more people to seek care at nonprofit safety-net facilities.

The survey was conducted because such evidence, while suggesting a clear trend, was not systematically captured elsewhere on a national level. Existing processes through which publicly available nationwide information is captured occur annually. This schedule and related lag time do not provide timely information upon which a judgment of a current situation or unfolding events can be assessed.

**Process:** In partnership with the National Association of Community Health Centers and the National Association of Free Clinics, Direct Relief developed the survey to garner a more detailed perspective on recent changes at a national level.

The survey also served as the basis for the practical application of allocating five million syringes and pen needles offered for donation by medical technology company BD to address challenges brought about by economic conditions.

**Survey Methodology:** The survey instrument was transmitted electronically to all federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and all free clinics in the United States for which Direct Relief had contact information. Facilities receiving the survey were asked to submit a response within a two-week period.

The reporting period was selected to enable FQHCs—the majority of surveyed facilities—to refer to prior-year data captured, reported, and submitted in the normal course of business. For the comparable period in 2009, respondents were asked to provide actual or estimated totals.

Survey respondents were not preselected. However, survey data cannot be described as truly random because this survey was conducted in conjunction with an offer of BD needles and syringes aimed at ameliorating conditions for low-income and uninsured diabetics at safety-net facilities. Therefore, inference to the entire U.S. safety-net clinic and health center population should be approached with due caution. Obvious sources of sampling bias inhibiting inferential analysis are such factors as relative need for the product and prior frequency of response to product offers. Nevertheless, the sheer size and scope of the clinical sample and of the reported patient population lend significant credence to the descriptive value of this data as a snapshot of critical patient trends.

Each response was reviewed individually and facilities' reported totals were evaluated against prior-year data contained in the publicly available patient utilization data submitted to the Health Services and Research Administration to identify potential reporting errors. Inconsistencies in previously reported data and information submitted on the survey were reviewed with individual respondent facilities to ensure accuracy.

**Results:** The survey was provided to 1,835 nonprofit clinics and health centers across the country; each of the 1,067 FQHC grantee corporations (many of which operate multiple clinical service delivery sites) in the United States and 768 free clinics.

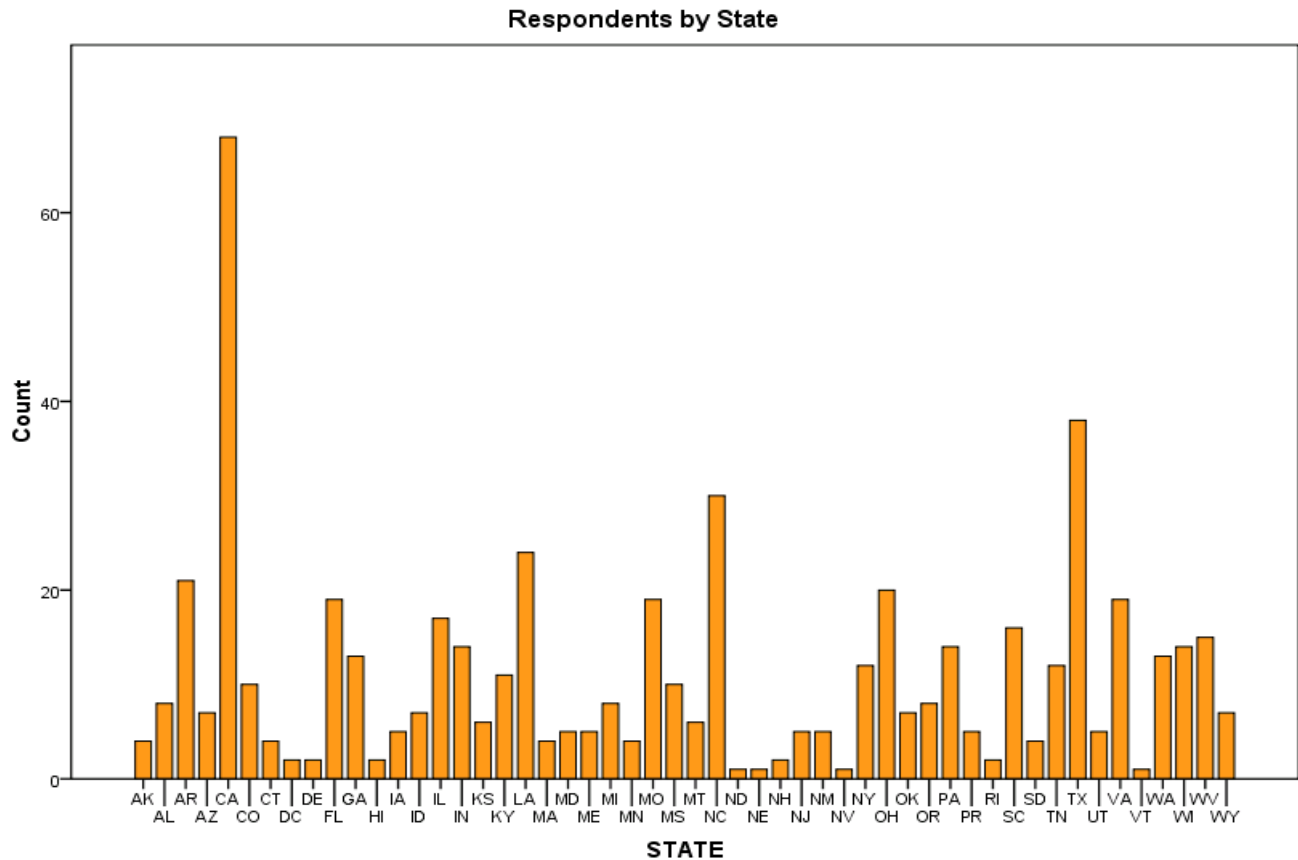
Survey data was processed and interpreted using SPSS 17; a total of 562 clinics (31%) responded to the survey. Those 562 respondents, including a significant number of FQHC grantee corporations representing multiple clinical service delivery sites, were distributed across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

Collectively, the 562 respondents reported the following patient totals during the first six months of 2009:

| <b>Patient Totals – All Respondents<br/>January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2009</b> |                           |                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
|                                                                              | <b>Number of Patients</b> | <b>% of Total Patients</b> |
| <b>Total Patients</b>                                                        | 4,252,223                 | 100%                       |
| <b>Uninsured Patients</b>                                                    | 1,921,954                 | 45.2%                      |
| <b>Diabetic Patients</b>                                                     | 615,634                   | 14.6%                      |
| <b>Uninsured Diabetic Patients</b>                                           | 366,333                   | 8.6%                       |

| <b>Change in Patient Totals – All Respondents<br/>January 1 - June 30: 2009 vs. 2008</b> |        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| <b>Total Patients</b>                                                                    | +7.9%  |
| <b>Diabetic Patients</b>                                                                 | +9.2%  |
| <b>Uninsured Patients</b>                                                                | +9.6%  |
| <b>Uninsured Diabetic Patients</b>                                                       | +12.9% |

| <b>States with Greatest Number of Clinical Respondents</b> |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>California</b>                                          | 68 |
| <b>Texas</b>                                               | 38 |
| <b>North Carolina</b>                                      | 30 |
| <b>Louisiana</b>                                           | 24 |
| <b>Ohio</b>                                                | 20 |



**Analysis and Conclusions:** The aim of this survey was narrowly focused on changes in the number of patients and patients with diabetes at nonprofit safety-net facilities, and Direct Relief is therefore reluctant to draw expansive inferences from the data received. Also recognized is that, despite the substantial amount of information received from safety-net providers in all 50 states (as well as D.C. and Puerto Rico) and standard validation efforts, the survey data do not represent a random sample. Inference to the entire safety-net provider population must therefore be strongly qualified. Nonetheless, Direct Relief believes that the data do represent as accurate a snapshot as is possible under such circumstances of the issues upon which the survey was focused.

The aggregated results of the survey, which showed overall increases in both the number of total patients and the number of patients with diabetes, mask the fact that a notable number (roughly 5%) reported seeing fewer patients during the first six months of 2009 compared to 2008.

Because reported declines were unexpected and seemed inconsistent with the overall pattern, they were among those that generated follow-up calls to respondents. Among responding facilities that reported a decline in overall patients, the overwhelmingly consistent explanation

was a reduction of clinical hours caused by the clinic's economic circumstances, for example, the need to close one day a week to save money.

This information gathered while validating responses suggests that the survey results showing an overall increase in patient visits during the first six months of 2009 fail to capture the full extent of increased demand for services that may have existed during this period among people seeking care at safety-net facilities.

Obviously, increased patient volumes reflect increased demand for services at the facilities. Yet because of some of the clinics were themselves contracting due to economic factors, the actual demand among patients seeking care at safety-net facilities was almost certainly higher than is reflected by the increase in patient volume.

In general, this survey confirms with substantial evidence that the economic recession has resulted in more patients seeking and receiving care at nonprofit safety-net facilities and that among the increased patients being seen, a higher percentage than previously have diabetes.

As noted above, the survey results understate—unfortunately by a margin Direct Relief cannot estimate from the survey results—the actual demand for health services among people whose principal access to care is from safety-net providers. Specifically, the survey confirms with a degree of precision publicly available information on a national scale the extent of increased patient volume and diabetic-patient volume at the respondent clinics and health centers.

**Appendix:** Survey Questions (following page)

**Survey Questions**

The information below was the content of the survey:

The table below is intended to help us evaluate the scale and scope of recent increases in your patient population from January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2009 so that we may gauge the scale of the donation.

Answers should be the total number of individual patients for the six-month period, NOT visits or encounters.

| January to June 2008                                    | Number | Actual | Estimated |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|
| <b>Total Number of Patients</b>                         |        |        |           |
| <b>Total Number of Uninsured Patients</b>               |        |        |           |
| <b>Total Number of Patients with Diabetes</b>           |        |        |           |
| <b>Total Number of Uninsured Patients with Diabetes</b> |        |        |           |

| January to June 2009                                    | Number | Actual | Estimated |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|
| <b>Total Number of Patients</b>                         |        |        |           |
| <b>Total Number of Uninsured Patients</b>               |        |        |           |
| <b>Total Number of Patients with Diabetes</b>           |        |        |           |
| <b>Total Number of Uninsured Patients with Diabetes</b> |        |        |           |



**For more information, contact:**

Andrew Schroeder, PhD  
27 S. La Patera Lane  
Santa Barbara, CA 93117  
(805) 964-4767  
[www.DirectRelief.org](http://www.DirectRelief.org)