

# Looking ahead to local health care reform

*While questions remain, officials believe residents will be helped by program*

**By Chris Sykes**  
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Health care reform took the first step toward reality last week when President Barack Obama signed the massive bill into law.

Most of the Democrats in Congress voted to approve the original and reconciliation bills. It was unanimously opposed by Republicans. After passage of the reconciliation, which included provisions to change the functions of the national college student-loan program, Obama signed the second measure on Tuesday.

Proponents have said the initiative will expand insurance coverage to 30 million American who are not insured.

Locally, some officials have said it means that people who had been relegated to the status of being on the outside looking in when it came to health insurance and access to quality care will be able to secure treatment.

During the opening of East Orange General Hospital's

Family Health Center in 2008, Suzette Robinson, the center's director, said New Jersey had "over 1.2 million residents who account for approximately 14 percent of New Jersey's population, who don't have medical coverage." That was why, she said at the time, the city's primary medical provider had participated in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Cover the Uninsured project.

When the state Department of Health and Senior Services allowed a nearby facility, Irvington General Hospital, to close in 2006, Kevin Slavin, president and chief executive officer of East Orange General Hospital, testified before a state health commission.

Slavin was asked by commission members if Irvington's closure would create an overly adverse impact of the health care of Irvington and nearby municipalities whose residents would have used it. The members also wanted to know if his hospital would be able to "pick up the slack" in terms of providing health care for residents in need

within Essex County's urban communities. Slavin said the hospital could.

Slavin's answer also related to the role his hospital has grown into since the closure of other area facilities such as the Hospital Center at Orange and Children's Hospital in Newark. Since then, residents from the communities it serves have had to turn to his facility for their needs.

Some people believe that situation might be poised to change within the first few years of the health plan. But others doubt it.

"Health care reform is a great thing, but I don't know that it would have saved Irvington General Hospital," said Councilman David Lyons, who represents Irvington's North Ward. "When they came in, they closed a lot of hospitals. It all came down to maximizing profits. I don't think charity care was the main reason IGH closed because a lot of people were on Medicare and Medicaid and St. Barnabas was taking that."