Health-care cuts to impact East County by Ruth Roberts Brentwood/Antioch Press



Emergency departments such as Kaiser Permanente in Antioch, above, might soon see an influx of patients due to the Board of Supervisors' recent cuts to the county's Basic Health Care Plan.

Photo by Rick Lemyre

Undocumented immigrants living in Contra Costa County took a health-care hit this week when the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors unanimously agreed to cut \$6 million in primary care services from the county's Basic Health Care Program. The decision will eliminate non-emergency services for nearly 6,000 illegal residents, the largest percentage coming from East County.

"Supervisor Glover made a vote that he didn't want to make," said Ed Diokno, public policy analyst for Glover's office. "But he feels he has to support it because he believes you can't spend money the county doesn't have (for the Basic Health Care Program)."

County Health Services Director William Walker, who presented the proposal to the Board of Supervisors, said the decision was difficult: "It's the hardest thing I've ever had to propose in my 34 years in the county, the reduction of access to patients."

In an effort to educate the public about the provisions of the proposed cuts, the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organizations (CCISCO) held a series of townhall meetings last month to help families who will be affected better understand their options. Families with young children, as well as adult children, attended the events and voiced their concerns.

"We held these town-hall meetings to help people understand what is going to happen," said Nancy Marquez, youth organizer for CCISCO. "What we are saying is that it's a really bad policy. These people cannot afford these cuts. It's a really horrible situation."

Under the new provisions of the plan, pregnant women and children will still be eligible for primary care and can receive treatment for other conditions as well, including communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and the flu.

Paid for out of the county's general fund, the Basic Health Care Program is designed to provide medical services to low-income uninsured residents. Those who qualify must be seen at either the county's free medical center in Martinez or at one of its health centers located throughout Contra Costa.

The termination in services to undocumented residents needing medical care means they will be forced to seek treatment at local emergency rooms – whether their is condition is urgent or not – a move that will likely impact private, nonprofit organizations such as Sutter Delta Regional Medical Center and Kaiser Permanente.

Diokno agreed: "Will they see an increase? Yes, the run-over from the county will probably impact the local facilities. But we're going to continue to look for ways to find additional funding to help share in additional expenses."

Jim Caroompas, spokesperson for Kaiser Permanente, said that regardless of the recent cutbacks, Kaiser will continue to do what it always has: serve residents in need.

"Kaiser Permanente understands and appreciates the difficult decisions facing the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors as well as businesses, services and citizens in this challenging economic climate," he said. "We will continue to work with the county and other care providers to find ways to respond to the health-care needs of all East Contra Costa County and all of the communities we serve."

Gary Rapaport, CEO of Sutter Delta in Antioch, believes his hospital's emergency room will likely feel the lion's share of the impact. According to figures released from the county, Rapaport said roughly 42 percent of those who will be affected by the cuts live in East County, the majority located closer to Sutter Delta than Kaiser.

"My understanding is that we (Sutter Delta) are at least as close to the county for those living in the Pittsburg and Bay Point areas, so they are more likely to come to us," said Rapaport. "We were financially challenged before the economy went down and we're all suffering now. Certainly we would like to solve any imbalances, and I believe there is hope to do that. But the primary concern is and always will be patient care."

Kaiser Permanente CEO Mike Tully-Cintron doesn't argue that Sutter Delta most likely sees more ER patients than Kaiser by virtue of their location, but maintains that their

member services organization is set up and ready to serve all who come through their doors.

"I agree that they are probably busier because they are in the line of traffic, so to speak, for that area," said Tully-Cintron. "But we certainly invite anyone with a need to come to our EDs (emergency departments), and they don't have to be members to be seen (in our emergency departments). We will never turn anyone away."

The concern among local health-care professionals is that when patients are denied primary care, they ignore their symptoms until their condition becomes worse and they're forced to use the emergency room.

Regardless, local emergency rooms are morally and financially obligated to treat whomever walks through their doors.

"From our point of view, it doesn't matter if you're documented or undocumented. A patient to us is a patient to us," said Rapaport. "Once you come to an emergency department, you have a right to be seen. The way the health-care system is historically set up, hospitals have the obligation to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves, and that's what we will do."