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Community clinics rally against funding cuts

By Gideon Marcus

SAN MARCOS — With California's budget deficit now above \$24 billion, Sacramento is looking at cutting public health. Four of San Diego County's community health centers, representing more than 200,000 patients annually, banded together for a joint press conference at North County Health Services, or NCHS, June 11, to protest a proposal by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to eliminate several programs which subsidize health costs for the poor and uninsured.

Community health centers provide care and education, particularly for those who would not otherwise have access to it. The governor presented plans in May to reduce Medi-CAL as well as cut SCHIP Healthy Families program, the Expanded Access to Primary Care program and state-funded HIV/AIDS screening, testing and prevention. This would leave thousands uninsured in San Diego County alone, and drain vital monies from health center coffers, conference speakers said.

"We will see these families suffering," Vista Community Clinic CEO Barbara Mannino said. "They will have to make a choice between having a roof over their children's heads, putting food on the table, or providing health care cover for their children."

"We have a fragile safety net right now that will become even more fragile if the cuts go through," CEO of Neighborhood Healthcare Tracy Reams said. "What it comes down to is the only way to keep the doors open is to reduce services."

Several speakers made the point that although cutting health coverage might save money in the short run, costs would ultimately run much higher. Patients who no longer could afford preventative clinic visits would find themselves accumulating tremendous emergency room bills later on.

Dr. Kevin Ellis, medical director for NCHS, said that this would not only lead to

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financial hardships for uninsured patients, but many would not be able to pay for the treatment they received which would cause hospitals to raise rates. This would drive up insurance costs for the already insured.

"What would have cost \$150 for three visits at a clinic could end up costing the system tens of thousands of dollars," NCHS President and CEO Irma Cota said. "It's prudent to retain these programs not just from the financial sense but also the ... quality of life."

Another concern brought up was N1H1 Swine Flu, which the World Health Organization had classified as a pandemic on the day of the conference. NCHS was swamped with thousands of

patients in May during the last outbreak, and Cota warned that community health centers would be ill-equipped to deal with another should the cuts go through. Cota ended the press conference with a plea for the community to put pressure on lawmakers to rescind the planned health care cuts and find another solution, whether by redirection or by generating more revenue.

"We urge voters to take action by calling their legislators and asking their legislator to retain these programs," Cota said.

"The governor said that he's here to listen to what the voters say," Service-Employees International Union representative Matthew Kostirsky said. "I think the voters will say loud and clear that this is a message they're not going to stand for."