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REGION | PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS KNOCKING AT EVERY DOOR



Dr. Amerito Posadas listens to 11-year-old Omar Apolinar's lungs Thursday at North County Health Services in San Marcos. JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE | jlytle@nctimes.com

Health care in crisis

Community clinic leaders say they worry about governor's proposals

By **EDWARD SIFUENTES**
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SAN MARCOS — A state proposal to reduce or eliminate health care programs for the poor could leave tens of thousands of people in North County with limited or no access to care, local community clinic leaders said Thursday.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed reducing state spending by billions of dollars to close an estimated \$24 billion budget gap.

The governor is proposing to cut more than \$1 billion from Medi-Cal, \$368 million from Healthy Families, and \$24 million from HIV education and prevention programs, among others.

Community clinic officials say those cuts would be devastating to their operations.

"We stand united in pleading

"Healthy Families has really saved our family. This happens to everybody. It's not just people who don't want to work or who are poor."

INGRID LORETO
Restaurant owner

to the governor and the legislators to consider the consequences of these cuts," said Irma Cota, CEO of the North County Health Services clinic in San Marcos.

Schwarzenegger has said that state government could come to a

"standstill" unless lawmakers act quickly to reach a budget compromise.

A spokeswoman for the governor said Thursday that there are simply no good options when it comes to reducing spending.

"The governor realizes that there are consequences, but in order to solve our \$24 billion deficit, there are only so many places to look," spokeswoman Lisa Page said.

The Healthy Families program, which the governor is proposing to eliminate, serves more than 75,000 children in San Diego County.

It is California's version of the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program.

The federal government matches the state's funding for Healthy Families dollar for dollar.

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If the state eliminates the program, it also will lose the federal funding.

Cota spoke at a news conference at the clinic about the potential consequences of the governor's proposed cuts.

She was joined by leaders of the Vista Community Clinic in Vista and Neighborhood Healthcare in Escondido. Combined, the clinics provide health services to more than 200,000 patients in North County each year.

The clinics stand to lose between \$2 million and \$2.5 million each if the governor's proposals are enacted by the Legislature, they said.

The community clinics are the region's health care safety net because there are no county hospitals or clinics, officials said.

In recent years, the clinics

have started seeing not only low-income families, but more and more working families who have lost their insurance at work, they say.

Cota said many of the clinic's new patients last year were people who either lost their job or lost their health insurance at work.

The number of patients at the clinic increased about 2,000 to more than 60,000 last year, she said.

Representatives for the two other clinics said they have seen similar increases in recent years.

At North County Health Services, Ingrid Loreto of Oceanside said her family enrolled in the Healthy Families program when her husband lost his sales job four years ago.

Her family owns a restaurant in Oceanside but doesn't earn enough to be able to afford private health insurance, she said.

"Healthy Families has really saved our family," Loreto

said. "This happens to everybody. It's not just people who don't want to work or who are poor."

Barbara Mannino, chief executive officer of the Vista Community Clinic, said that cutting funding for community clinics eventually could cost more in services, because sick people who can't access community clinics could show up in emergency rooms or hospitals, where care is more expensive.

"Preventive care is a short-term cost with a long-term return on investment," Mannino said.

Tracy Ream, chief executive director of Neighborhood Healthcare, said people without health insurance wait until they are very ill to get care.

"Without Healthy Families coverage, people will forego medical care and parents will delay seeking treatment for their children," she said.

"We will see an increase in the severity of diseases due

to later diagnosis."

If the cuts are implemented, North County Health Services stands to lose about \$2 million, including money from Healthy Families, Medi-Cal, Expanded Access to Primary Care and a program that pays for adult dental care, Cota said.

The \$2 million represents about 5 percent of the clinic's \$38 million annual budget.

Cota said losing those revenues would affect about 15,000 of the clinic's 60,000 patients.

Because most of their patients are uninsured, the clinics operate on very tight budgets.

"We don't have any places that we can cut," Cota said.

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