

Clinics stand to lose millions in state funds

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State budget cuts could mean higher fees, longer waits and fewer health care workers at local community clinics, health officials say.

In last-minute adjustments, the governor eliminated more than \$600 million from the state's revised \$85 billion budget. Most of that money, about \$394 million, came from health and human services programs, according to the California Budget Project, a group that advocates for poor and middle-income families.

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profit health centers in the state.

Barbara Mannino, executive director for the Vista Community Clinic, which serves more than 50,000 patients in North County each

Of that money, community clinics statewide will lose about \$35 million, according to the California Primary Care Association, which represents about 600 non-

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year, said her clinic will lose close to \$1 million in funding from just two programs, one that offsets the cost of serving uninsured patients and another that funds HIV/AIDS services.

"We are trying to figure out how to make things work," Mannino said.

The clinic has a budget of about \$26 million, and about 60 percent of its patients are uninsured. Many of them pay on a sliding fee scale. Mannino said one of the ways the clinic is looking to make up the loss is by increasing fees.

The \$35 million cut comes in what community clinic officials call "traditional programs," such as Expanded Access to Primary Care, which helps clinics pay for such things as lab work and X-rays when a patient is uninsured.

But with some of the other budget cuts, more patients are likely to become uninsured and increase the clinic's problems.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's last-minute line item vetoes included an additional \$50 million reduction in state funding for Healthy Families, the low-cost health insurance

program for poor children. That is in addition to \$124 million the Legislature already had agreed to cut from the program.

In San Diego County, about 75,000 people get their health insurance through Healthy Families, and about 3,000 of them are patients at the Vista Community Clinic. Some of those patients may be put on a waiting list when their current coverage runs out, according to advocates for the poor.

Many new Healthy Families applicants may meet the same fate, advocates say.

"This budget shreds our state's safety net," said Anthony Wright, executive director for Health Access California, a health advocacy group. "As with other programs, Healthy Families will exist in name, but be a shadow of its former self, shuttered and actively kicking kids off coverage."

How many people will lose their coverage in North County as a result of these cuts is not yet known, Mannino said.

Officials with the three largest nonprofit clinics in North County — Neighborhood Healthcare based in Escondido, North County Health Services based in San Marcos and the Vista Community Clinic based in Vista — said this week that combined they

expect to receive about \$10 million in federal stimulus money over the next two years.

But that money is no substitute for the state cuts, officials said, because they serve different functions. For example, much of the federal grant money is aimed at upgrading patient records systems and facilities.

Last week, Don Steuer, the county's chief financial officer, said a preliminary analysis showed the county could lose about \$70 million in property tax revenue this year and an additional \$80 million over two years in gas tax revenue because of the state's budget, Steuer said.

The county also could lose \$10 million for redevelopment projects, he said.

Steuer was not available for comment on Friday. But counties could lose even more under the budget signed by the governor on Tuesday because it includes additional cuts for local governments.

Schwarzenegger eliminated an additional \$60 million in funding for counties. That money was supposed to pay counties to administer Medi-Cal, the state's health insurance for the poor.

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