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REGION: Vista Community Clinic sees big jump in uninsured

Other clinics see opposite trend

By PAUL SISSON - psisson@nctimes.com | Posted: Saturday, May 29, 2010 8:23 pm

A 13 percent jump in patient visits has doctors, nurses and administrators at Vista Community Clinic's five locations casting a nervous eye to the future as they serve the growing ranks of the uninsured in North County, clinic leaders said last week.

The clinic, which operates offices in Vista and Oceanside, saw 164,408 patients between July 2009 and March 2010, officials said. That's 18,117 more patients than came to the clinic during the same nine-month period the previous year.

Barbara Mannino, the clinic's chief executive officer, attributed the surge of newly uninsured adults who have lost their jobs and health insurance over the last two years.

"Many of them, if they are employed, are only working part-time, and they have no health benefits," said Mannino, adding that she had expected a smaller bump in volume ---- closer to 5 or 6 percent.

Not all community clinics are reporting the same increase.

North County Health Services, which operates clinics in Encinitas, Oceanside, San Marcos, Ramona and Carlsbad, has seen modest growth at only one of its sites, said its director, Irma Cota.

She said a recently opened clinic on Crouch Street has seen about 6 percent more visits than expected, but the number of visits at other local clinics has been flat.

Cota said that decreases in local agricultural operations such as nurseries and greenhouses have caused many workers to leave the area. She said those departing workers have largely been replaced by newly uninsured patients, but the two groups seem to have balanced each other out.

Mannino said Vista Community Clinic has been able to absorb the extra cost of treating nearly 20,000 unanticipated patients, largely because federal stimulus payments helped open a new facility on Grapevine Road in Vista.

Local clinics get most of their money from the state, which is in the midst of a serious budget crisis.

Mannino said about \$700,000 in state funding is in jeopardy and could seriously affect patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes.

For example, the state is proposing limiting prescription medications to six per patient per month and also limiting the number of doctor's visits to 10 per year for those who qualify for Medi-Cal, the state's low-income insurance program.

While she said the clinic will find a way to continue providing services, Mannino worried about how the state-level cuts will affect the needy.

"We always say the feds giveth and the state taketh away," Mannino said.

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