

Argus Courier - Health providers form new coalition

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HEALTH PROVIDERS FORM NEW COALITION

MEDICAL OFFICIALS CONCERNED ABOUT IMPACTS OF POSSIBLE CLOSURE OF SUTTER

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Concerned that health-care services could suffer if Sutter Medical Center in Santa Rosa closes, administrators from Petaluma and other Sonoma County districts, community hospitals and clinics, as well as physicians, have formed a coalition, and are holding regular meetings.

“This Community-Based Providers group has been discussing the affects of the potential closure of the Sutter hospital on patients and community health-care providers, and looking at opportunities that may be available to clinics and hospitals,” said Daymon Doss, CEO of the Petaluma Health Care District, who has participated in the meetings.

Other Petaluma participants have included president Bob Hill and Josephine Thornton from the PHCD board, as well as CEO Kathy Powell and medical director Dr. Kelly Pfeifer from the Petaluma Health Center.

“The coalition is asking, ‘Are there things that we could do collectively to help the situation?’” Doss added. “We have wanted to lend support to the coalition by listening and participating whenever appropriate, but the participation of our health care district is limited because we don’t operate Petaluma Valley Hospital on a daily basis.”

This coalition first met on Feb. 20, and agreed to meet on the first Tuesday and third Wednesday of each month.

“Initially, the meetings focused on the process for public input and the role of community hospitals and clinics,” Doss said.

The coalition has formed sub-groups to focus on three specific issues: vision and plan for services, political strategy and the possibility of issuing a joint powers agreement, a tool used to express collective unity.

“We may or may not issue a joint powers agreement, but I anticipate that as a group, we will have a statement to issue once the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors begins public hearings,” Doss said. “We can help educate the board and the community about our concerns and the capacities of health-care facilities.”

His own main focus has been on the need to inform people that many emergency room patients should be utilizing other facilities.

“The vast majority of patients with MediCal or who are uninsured get their health care at community clinics and in emergency rooms,” Doss said. “We need to help educate people on the roles of these places. People don’t need to go to emergency rooms for non-emergent care, but many of them do. If these patients are redistributed to other places, this will be a big help,” Doss said.

The Sonoma County Department of Health Services — which is actively assessing the impact of the transfer of services from Sutter to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital and is scheduled to finish a preliminary report on April 13 — also is participating in the meetings.

The Board of Supervisors, along with the state Attorney’s General’s Office, will decide whether or not to approve the SMC-SRMH agreement, and it has directed the DHS to conduct an assessment to establish how it would impact the community. During a board workshop on April 17, the DHS is scheduled to give a report on the preliminary study and there will be an opportunity for public comment.

“But this date is not considered an ‘action date.’ There probably won’t be a decision at that time,” Doss said.

And the actual transfer of services agreement between SMC and SRMH still hasn’t been released, making it difficult for the county’s other health-care providers to know how to proceed. Further complicating the matter is that the transfer of services is planned for early 2008, less than one year away.

“There is a level of concern about the planned transfer. When St. Joseph Health System began operating Petaluma Valley Hospital, it took a full year to change management teams, and this transfer is much more complicated,” Doss said.

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