

Argus Courier - New council could give big boost to health care

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NEW COUNCIL COULD GIVE BIG BOOST TO HEALTH CARE

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Like many things in life, it's happened in a very topsy-turvy, roundabout way, but people aren't complaining.

When Sutter Medical Center announced on Jan. 8 that it planned to close the facility it operates on Chanate Road in Santa Rosa and transfer most of its services to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital by 2008, people complained about the suddenness of the announcement, and quickly pointed out that a health care access agreement stipulates that Sutter is obligated to provide services through 2016.

As countywide concerns grew over the proposed transfer, a group of health-care providers began meeting, and this led to the creation of the Sonoma Health Access Coalition, which is focusing on outpatient primary care and illness prevention, and attempting to assure that people who want to hook up with a private physician can do so throughout the county.

As the Sonoma County Department of Health Services became increasingly aware of public concern over the possible closure of Sutter, it hired two independents consultants to prepare an impact study on the proposed transaction. This report pinpointed some serious concerns in local health care.

And on Aug. 14, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors announced that it is endorsing a plan by the Department of Health Services to convene a committee of high-profile community leaders to try to improve health care for all Sonoma County residents. Rita Scardaci, director of the Department of Health Services, and Supervisor Tim Smith will chair the council, which will consist of 30 to

35 appointees from medical service providers, as well as businesses, education, government and consumer groups.

“I believe that this council is an offspring of the impact study done on the proposed Sutter-Santa Rosa Memorial transfer,” said Daymon Doss, CEO of the Petaluma Health Care District.

Many health care administrators and workers feel that the survey and formation of the two groups potentially can help to boost health care in the county, even if the Sutter situation had never developed. But in retrospect, the controversial and frequently criticized Sutter plan instigated a countywide effort to address pressing health-care concerns, and its positive ramifications could be felt for decades.

Doss feels that the creation of the high-profile committee, the Community Health Improvement Action Council, is a major development. County supervisors approved spending \$242,000 on the council’s program, and some 30 percent of it is contractually obligated to Pacific Health Consulting Group in San Anselmo.

“It will be a very important council, and will offer a strong opportunity to take a look at the public and private hospital systems and community clinics,” Doss said, adding that it will supersede the Sonoma Health Access Coalition.

Petaluma’s council members haven’t been appointed, but Doss is optimistic that they will have a voice in countywide issues.

“I hope that they will have input into the decision-making process, regardless of whether or not Sutter stays open or closes. This council will be a key piece in determining how health-care services are distributed in the county,” he said.

Scardaci emphasizes that health-care access will be one of many concerns the council addresses.

“While access to medical care is an important determinant of community health, other determinants include individual health behaviors and choices, and impacts of our workplaces, schools and neighbors on those choices and behaviors,” she said.

Scardaci said that the council might take a close look at such issues as the uninsured people's access to health care; the growing shortage of physicians and other health-care workers; the need for additional treatment for alcohol and other drugs; and capacity problems in the delivery system.

The council, which will convene in October, is likely to focus on major determinants of community health — including individual behavior and socio-economic and environmental factors — in an effort to prevent illness and injury, and promote better health, she said.

In the first year of an initial two-year planning process, the council will review county health data, prioritize health issues, identify those that might be addressed through local initiatives and develop recommendations for collaborative action.

“During the second year, the council will oversee and implement those recommendations,” Doss said, adding that its goal is to turn in a preliminary report to the county board of supervisors by October 2008.

Smith feels that the council could accomplish a great deal.

“Continuing changes in the health care system are likely to create big challenges for our community, but they may also present real opportunities, provided we can work together and respond,” he said. “It is my hope that the council can offer the leadership and support needed to tackle local health-care issues and find solutions that benefit everyone.”

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