

Press Democrat - Preparing for future of health care

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## **PREPARING FOR FUTURE OF HEALTH CARE**

### **GROUP WOULD HELP COUNTY DEAL WITH SUTTER CLOSURE, RISING COSTS, THE UNINSURED**

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A Sonoma County government initiative is under way to deal with the day Sutter Health no longer operates the public hospital and the day the federal government overhauls the health care system, whether such events happen next year or 10 years from now.

"Even if nothing happens, the time for waiting is over," said Supervisor Tim Smith, who will lead the effort along with county health services director Rita Scardaci. "Frankly, I wish we had done this some time ago."

County supervisors and health officials say Sutter Health's announcement earlier this year of its intention to turn over publicly guaranteed health services to Memorial Hospital prompted them to look at the need for task forces to deal with the future of local health care delivery and community health issues.

"We had bad experiences with Health Plan of the Redwoods going bankrupt, doctors' groups going out of business, district hospitals and clinics struggling and Medi-Cal payments," Smith said.

The group, to be called the Community Health Improvement Action Council, will be composed of about three dozen representatives of medical service providers, business, government and labor, and is intended to be in place to put pieces together even as the system appears to be falling apart.

"We don't want the Sutter-Memorial thing to drive everything, but we do want the group to offer overall solutions," Scardaci said.

Scardaci said Sutter's desire to opt out of its 20-year contract remains in "meet-and-confer status" in which administrators and lawyers are regularly

gathering to negotiate details of Sutter's departure.

Sutter's current contract runs until 2016, but the Sacramento-based health corporation is attempting to gain county approval of its plans to turn some services over to Memorial and some to other medical providers.

High on the list of priorities for the council to tackle are implications of federal and state proposals for health care overhaul, rising costs of health insurance and the increasing number of uninsured patients, she said.

The group, whose membership has not been selected, is supposed to begin meeting in October and to convene public forums on recommendations next July. Policy recommendations are to be presented to supervisors in October 2008.

Earlier this week, supervisors approved spending about \$242,000 on the program, with about 30 percent committed to a contract with Pacific Health Consulting Group, based in San Anselmo.

Board Chairwoman Valerie Brown said the health care community leadership panel is modeled along the lines of others in the country that are grappling with similar crises in health care delivery and financing.

As a vice president of the National Association of Counties chairing the group's health care committee, Brown said she found it has become crucial for local medical service providers, community interests and government health officials to establish an ongoing forum for handling issues. She cited King County, Washington, which includes Seattle, as an example of government and health care providers convening to coordinate efforts.

"It is an outgrowth of our situation with Sutter, but it does provide us with the opportunity to take a long term look at what makes sense for us," Brown said.

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