

Governor's cuts trigger closure of Potter Valley health clinic

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Published: Wednesday, August 5, 2009 at 6:49 p.m.

Last Modified: Wednesday, August 5, 2009 at 6:49 p.m.

The Potter Valley Community Health Center is closing after nearly three decades, leaving the small farming community northeast of Ukiah without a physician.

“The governor’s budget cuts have delivered a death blow to this 27-year-old community institution,” Cathy Frey, executive director of the Alliance for Rural Community Health, said Wednesday.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last week eliminated funding for several programs that kept the clinic afloat, she said. The cuts added up to a loss of \$546,000, a third of the clinic’s \$1.5 million budget, Frey said.

Community health clinics throughout the state are reeling from the governor’s cuts, but Potter Valley’s may be the first to close as a result, she said.

The clinic employs 27 people and serves 3,300 patients from Potter Valley and nearby locales.

Clinic clients will need to find new physicians and drive an hour roundtrip to Ukiah for appointments after the doors shut Aug. 21.

“I worry about our elderly residents,” said Carre Brown, a Mendocino County supervisor, Potter Valley rancher and client of the health clinic for more than 20 years.

Many cannot drive or have difficulty driving, she said.

Nancy March, 78, can still drive pretty well, despite having a degenerative eye condition. But her 86-year-old husband is limited to driving in Potter Valley, which, including surrounding areas, has a population of about 3,000.

“It’s going to be a real hardship,” Nancy March said of the prospect of extra trips into Ukiah for medical appointments and laboratory tests.

It also will be tough to find a new doctor because many are not accepting new patients, she said.

Sue Meek, president of the health clinic board, said Potter Valley residents are trying to figure out how to best cope with the closure. “This is a tight community, we take care of each other,” she said.

Church groups may need to step in to fill the transportation need, Meek said

Brown said she’s hoping for a taxi or bus service for seniors. There currently is no bus service to Potter Valley, Brown said.

Some health care cuts were expected, but the closure caught Meek and other board members off guard, she said.

“We never dreamed” the clinic would be forced to shut down, she said. They made the decision following a Monday night evaluation of the financial situation.

Community health clinics throughout the state were hit by the latest budget cuts, Frey said. But most of the others are not as heavily dependent on state-funded programs to fill revenue gaps, she said.

The Anderson Valley Health Center in Boonville is in a similar financial position but is attempting to avoid closure with salary cuts, Frey said. Neither clinic is eligible for federal stimulus funds, she said.

The four clinics in the county that are eligible for federal funds still must consider cuts in staff, salaries and benefits in order to cope, she said.

The cuts to rural health care clinics come at a time when they’ve seen a 10 percent increase in uninsured patients, the result of high unemployment and employers cutting health care, Frey said.

“It’s really a sad day,” she said.

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