

# THE Willits News

## COMMENTARY: Governor's knife hacks holes in county healthcare delivery system

By Cathy Frey

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The board of directors of the Potter Valley Community Health Center recently met with operational and financial consultants, who brought news directors did not want to hear. Despite an outstanding staff and productive medical and dental programs, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget cuts delivered a death blow to the 27-year-old community institution.

Recent cuts and "blue-line vetoes" has dismembered traditional clinic funding programs. Like other local health centers, PVCHC faced cuts to Rural Health Services Development and Seasonal Agricultural Migratory Worker funding, and draconian reductions to Healthy Families and Expanded Access to Primary Care Program.

With one-third of its budget severed, PVCHC has no alternative but to close its doors.

"I am deeply saddened by Potter Valley's closure," said Cathy Frey, executive director for the Alliance for Rural Community Health (ARCH). "As one of Mendocino County's long-standing community health centers, it was an instrumental part of the health delivery system in our county. More importantly, I am disappointed the governor has chosen to close the state's budget gap on the backs of people living in rural California. His recent cuts to funding for health centers and clinics will result in many more clinic closures in rural areas throughout the state."

Other local centers are coping with similar, if less severe, wounds:

Mendocino Community Health Clinic in Ukiah, Willits and Lakeport expects a \$260,000 loss in revenue from the governor's elimination of optional benefits; staff reductions in MCHC's dental program have already taken place.

Long Valley Health Center in Laytonville, facing more than \$300,000 in funding cuts, is still grappling with a mix of salary, benefit and staff reductions.

Anderson Valley Health Center in Boonville, in an effort to respond to the loss of one-third of its budget, has implemented 10 percent salary cuts for its entire staff.

Mendocino Coast Clinics in Fort Bragg is exploring a number of strategies to cope with funding losses totaling more than \$685,000.

Redwood Coast Medical Services in Gualala expects an \$180,000 loss and also is exploring a number of options to deal with this situation.

Though significant federal stimulus funding has recently come into Mendocino County's four federally qualified health centers, the extreme restrictions placed on the funds forbid their use to for health center operations. It is important to note PVCHC, along with Anderson Valley Health Center, does not receive federal funds, and therefore was not eligible and did not receive stimulus dollars. At a time when President Obama is bolstering the health center system infrastructure, state cuts are undermining operational sustainability. It is a Catch 22 situation that threatens access to primary healthcare services for every individual in Mendocino County.

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The amputation of health care funding comes at a time when local community health centers have seen an approximate 10 percent increase in the number of uninsured patients seeking care just this year. This increase is fueled by rising unemployment rates and an increasing number of local businesses who are withdrawing health care from their employee benefit package in order to make ends meet.

These catastrophic losses have serious implications for the local economy. In Potter Valley alone, 27 individuals will have lost their jobs following PVCHC's August 21 closure. Other community health centers have already implemented staff cuts.

Community health center employees make significant contribution to local economic stability. According to Bureau of Economic Analysis modeling, for every 10 of the jobs provided by our community health centers, another nine direct-effect jobs are created within the community. Indirectly, spending by CHC employees augment household incomes for workers in other area business. The "trickle-down" effect of health center job losses will soon be felt throughout Mendocino County.

Everyone needs to be concerned about the implications of Potter Valley's closure on the local economy, and their personal health care. We urge everyone to contact the governor to demand restoration of health center funding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cathy Frey is executive director of the Alliance for Rural Community Health.

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