

Some medical services for undocumented people in Fresno County could end soon

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Marc Benjamin

Undocumented immigrants may have no access to certain types of medical services later this year if the Fresno County Board of Supervisors moves ahead with plans to end a contract for indigent health services with Community Regional Medical Center.

The program could end because the county won a lawsuit earlier this year when a Fresno County Superior Court judge ruled it didn't have to provide those services in light of the changing health care environment.

The ruling reversed a 30-year-old court order requiring the county to pay for medical services for undocumented immigrants.

County officials are in discussions with representatives from Community Medical Centers, insurers and local clinics that provide services for undocumented immigrants and the indigent.

"The partners may disagree, but we are pulling in as many of the right people as we can to understand what we can do," said David Pomaville, Fresno County's director of public health. "There are a lot of changes in the health care system."

Under rules for the hospital contract, service changes require 90 days to go into effect. Supervisors must vote to end the contract, which could occur Tuesday.

The county's contract with Community Regional pays the hospital more than \$20 million for services. The hospital pays or writes off about \$80 million for those services.

But with new enrollments because of the Affordable Care Act through Covered California and expanded Medi-Cal there are fewer indigent hospital patients, and state and federal programs have significantly cut the amounts to counties for indigent health care, Pomaville said.

Undocumented immigrants have no access to expanded Medi-Cal or Covered California. They can get primary care through federally qualified health centers and emergency care at hospitals, but they will not qualify for specialty care for ailments like diabetes or heart problems.

Pomaville admits there is significant work in front of local officials.

They will have to develop a new system of care for indigent residents and those who are undocumented by agreeing on services for primary and specialty care, hospitalization, pharmacy and emergency services. The county also will be required to authorize treatment and hear appeals for those who are denied services.

There are about 19,000 people who accessed services through the county's indigent services program under the hospital contract. Of those, about 5,000 were undocumented.

The county projects the average cost per patient for specialty care at about \$3,500, resulting in an annual cost between \$17.5 million and \$21 million.

The county has access to \$5.5 million if it accepts a deferment of road funds that must be repaid. Fresno County was hit with the repayment after it failed to use the money on transportation projects dating back to the late 1990s.

The county can use the money as long as goes to indigent health care, but it must repay the funds in 2020. The funding would allow the county to continue its contract with Community Regional through April, Pomaville said.

But that money has strings attached, Supervisor Judy Case McNairy said.

"It's not paid for," she said. "There is no source of revenue from state and federal funds."

The county will have nearly \$10 million cut from its budget this year because of the realignment of health services.

Case McNairy said federally qualified health centers are capable of providing specialty services that the hospital no longer will without the contract.

But while clinics can offer specialty care, reimbursement for such patients is not enough to attract specialty doctors, said Stephen Schilling, chief executive officer for Clinica Sierra Vista, who met with Pomaville last week.

"I would hire any and all specialists and give them the entire reimbursement, but they aren't going to come to work for me," Schilling said. "It's the specialty community that will refuse to come to work for the rates that we can pay."

Getting specialty services for patients already is difficult enough, he said. One of his clinic's patients had to wait 18 months to consult with a neurologist.

When the county contract ends, he said, there will be thousands of people who remain uninsured -- both legal citizens and undocumented residents.

"These folks will get sicker and sicker and present for care when they are beyond (basic) treatment and a danger to the community around them," Schilling said.

If you go

What: Meeting of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors

When: 9 a.m. Tuesday

Where: Hall of Records, 2261 Tulare St., Fresno

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