

Wise turn to La Clinica

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Even before the state announced the extent of its fiscal crisis - and unveiled plans that call for at least a 10 percent cut in Medi-Cal - hospitals and clinics here and throughout California were struggling to serve their highest-risk communities.

Counties are expected to provide medical care to indigent people by operating primary care clinics and contracting with providers. Yet because of the last eight years of challenges to providing that care, more and more Solano County folks haven't been getting the care they needed when they needed it. Instead, they have ended up in emergency rooms - the most expensive form of health care.

Between 2000 and 2006, emergency room visits increased by about 13 percent, with Sutter Solano Hospital in Vallejo seeing the largest increase, according to a Solano County Healthcare Safety Net Overview issued in November 2007.

In Solano County, only about 7 percent of the population is uninsured, but those residents account for about 13 percent of the emergency room visits.

The issue was of particular concern in Vallejo, which has the lowest income area in all the county.

That's why it was a good move for the Solano County Board of Supervisors to vote 5-0 Tuesday to invest \$250,000 on a new primary health clinic for low-income residents in Vallejo, and put another \$64,000 toward providing health care for children using the clinic.

The money will help La Clinica de la Raza make tenant improvements to a new building as well as cover start-up costs. In addition, Kaiser Permanente and Sutter Solano both pledged to donate \$100,000 each for three years to help with La Clinica's operational costs. La Clinica has been providing primary care services since 2002, and expanded in 2006 to include the "Great Beginnings" pre-natal clinic located near Sutter Solano Hospital in Vallejo.

The county also approved a \$64,025 contract with the Solano Coalition for Better Health to pay additional Healthy Kids Insurance premiums.

The county had previously set aside \$200,000 in the 2007-08 budget to expand the Smile In Style program, but decided to divert the money to the clinic. An extra \$50,000 needed for the project will come from unspent 2007-08 Master Settlement Agreement funds, money collected from tobacco companies.

La Clinica expects to be able to secure grants that will make it self-sustaining.

The county is wise to establish a partner that can help share the burden of medical care, especially at a time when the state is reeling. Taking pressure off the Vallejo facility will likely ease the pressure on emergency rooms throughout the county and will encourage a more healthy community.