



CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC HOSPITALS AND HEALTH SYSTEMS

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Growing Numbers of Californians Turning to Their Public Hospitals as Economic Crisis Deepens, Survey Shows

*Numbers likely much higher since date of survey;
many patients in need of life-saving treatment*

Oakland, CA, February 11, 2009 – A recent survey of the 19 members of California’s public hospital association bore out what hospital administrators have witnessed anecdotally for more than a year: their hospitals have seen a large increase in the number of patients at their doors due to the economic crisis that has gripped the State and the nation. And, the association says, these numbers may turn out to be small compared to what lies ahead.

The survey, conducted by the California Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems (CAPH) and described in a report it released today, asked the hospitals to compare patient data in October 2008 to those of October 2007. Statewide, the results showed a 4 percent increase in the number of patients – a figure that translates to approximately 100,000 additional patients over the course of a year. Moreover, the public hospital systems sustained a 10 percent increase in the number of uninsured patients seeking care overall, and a 19 percent jump in uninsured seeking care in their emergency rooms.

“These numbers tell us what most of us already knew, namely that as more and more people lost their jobs, they also lost their health insurance or the means to pay for it,” said Melissa Stafford Jones, president and CEO of CAPH. “Without access to their regular health care provider, or the ability to pay for prescriptions, thousands of Californians have found their way to their local public hospital for needed health care.”

Numbers higher now and likely will grow much higher still

In the short time since the October data reporting period, California’s unemployment rate has increased by more than one full percentage point – from 8.2 percent to 9.3 percent at the end of December – and indeed CAPH member hospitals have reported an even greater rise in their patient population, especially in their emergency rooms and outpatient clinics. “If we were to compare data for January 2009 to the same month a year before, I know we would see a larger increase than what our survey revealed,” said Stafford Jones. “And I’m afraid this might just be the tip of the iceberg, as thousands more people continue to lose their jobs.”

Some individual public hospital systems reported particularly high increases in patients overall or in certain sections of their system, and/or in the number of uninsured needing care. Among the survey findings:

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- San Joaquin General Hospital saw a 15 percent increase in the number of patients overall.
- Contra Costa Regional Medical Center and Los Angeles County, which operates four hospitals, both reported a 12 percent increase in patients coming to their emergency rooms for treatment of medical problems or prescription refills.
- Santa Clara Valley Health System saw a one-third increase in the number of new patients in its emergency room.
- Riverside County Health Services reported an 11 percent increase in people seeking services in its outpatient clinics.

Public hospitals stepping in to meet patients' urgent medical needs

Public hospitals report that many of these new patients have had their health compromised due to a lapse in treatment since they lost their insurance coverage, and many other patients are in need of immediate ongoing care for diseases such as cancer or asthma.

“In one week alone, we saw four new cancer patients arrive at our hospital in need of continued chemotherapy treatment,” said Evan Slater, M.D., chief of oncology for Ventura County Medical Center. “All four had lost their jobs and their insurance along with it. I’m just glad they were able to find us in a timely fashion and that we are able to provide the required care. Many of these chemotherapies are specialized and some are extremely expensive, but we’re doing everything possible to make sure we can continue with the prescribed course of treatment,” Slater added.

Although many patients facing both a job loss and a life-threatening illness simultaneously are understandably distraught, many also are grateful that they found help at their public hospital. Penny P., an Alameda County resident whose husband lost his job and his health insurance that had covered him and his wife, came to Alameda County Medical Center’s Highland Hospital in Oakland where doctors were able to treat her inflammatory breast cancer. After chemotherapy and a mastectomy, her prognosis is good and Penny is relieved. “Highland saved my butt,” she said.

Funds dwindle as patient load increases

As the CAPH report mentions, two-thirds of California’s public hospitals already have budget shortfalls and are facing additional cuts at the county level due to shrinking budgets caused by lower tax revenues. In addition, Governor Schwarzenegger has proposed cutting an additional \$54 million in funding that is specifically targeted for public hospitals’ care of the uninsured. The Governor has proposed this cut twice before and the Legislature has rejected it each time, and public hospitals are hoping legislators will reject it once again.

“Our public hospitals are committed to continuing their essential mission as the health care safety net – even as that net catches more and more people who may have thought they never would need it,” said Stafford Jones. “But we need our elected officials to help keep that safety net strong. If access is threatened, our economic crisis may well turn into a worsening health care crisis as well,” she noted.

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CAPH represents 19 public hospital systems throughout California. These systems are located in 15 counties where more than 80% of the State’s population lives, and provide a wide array of inpatient and outpatient services to nearly 2.5 million Californians each year.