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Clinic braces for patient influx

Cedar Health's possible closure shifts load

POCATELLO — Perhaps he'll start a special day clinic and hire some extra staff to accommodate the influx of mental health patients that may be coming his way. Stephen C. Weeg, executive director of Health West, isn't sure how much the demand stands to increase.

But Cedar Health Center, a private, nonprofit mental health clinic that's long been a preferred option for local indigent patients, has announced it will likely be forced to shut its doors soon due to a budget shortfall. Weeg knows Health West — which runs federally funded community medical and mental health clinics in the region — will play a major role in treating the displaced patients.

The Bannock County Commission recently denied a request by Cedar for \$12,000 to help it stay open through the spring.

Local mental health providers are now discussing their options in anticipation of getting some of Cedar's 700 patients. Given the fact that 40 percent of those clients have no insurance, Health West's cut rates for indigent people should be appealing.

"I don't know how many people will be knocking on the door in the next three weeks, but if someone calls and asks for an appointment, they'll get seen," Weeg said. "We will simply do our best to work a plan with (Cedar Director Kathleen Werner-Leap) to create a seamless transition by sharing information about prescriptions and clinical care her patients received."

Health West, the only federally funded community health clinic in the area, received a special grant to help serve the uninsured. This allows them to offer a sliding fee scale for those who don't qualify for Medicaid.

Human Development Center, an Idaho State University affiliated mental health clinic run by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, only takes in people who are an extreme risk to themselves or others, according to Director Ed Axford. The center treats about 600 patients, and those who are uninsured and do not qualify for its services get referred to Cedar or Health West, he said.

Linda Hatzenbuehler, dean of the ISU Kasiska College of Health Professions, recently wrote a grant for Health West to expand its mental health services. Health West also applied for the grant last year but didn't receive it.

"Health West does not have the capacity to take on all the people that Kathy has been helping (at Cedar)," Hatzenbuehler said. "It's going to be a sad thing if her clinic has to close. I don't know what's going to happen to all those people."

Werner-Leap said she's already had to turn away about 20 patients, something she's never done before. One of those clients has contacted Health West for help and can't be seen there until late March, Werner-Leap said.

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“A good portion, I would say 40 percent of my clients, will probably find help easily,” Werner-Leap said. “It’s the other 60 percent I’m worried about.”

Though she’s still hoping for a miracle, she’s started sending out letters announcing her facility is closing.

Portneuf Medical Center has been expanding its mental health outpatient services with the recent addition of two psychiatric doctors, according to PMC Program Director of Behavioral Services Charlie Asant.

Asant said PMC will coordinate with Health West and the Human Development Center regarding treatment of patients.

He added that PMC relies on county funds for indigent patients who arrive at the hospital emergency room and are admitted to the inpatient unit. For those who are not admitted and just seek treatment, PMC relies on either patient self-pay or charity care, which is “quite often granted,” Asant said.

Scott Greaves, director of indigent services for Bannock County, said the broader issue is that the state hasn’t been adequately funding mental health care.

“We realize that once Cedar isn’t there to help these people out, it’s going to cost everyone in this community more money to pick up the help for them,” Greaves said. “Kathy is an excellent health treatment professional but, she couldn’t prove that she had a plan to make her business run any better.”

Weeg concurred that the overarching problem is the lack of state funds for mental health care, and too many of its residents lack insurance.

“Kathy, in her way, tried to fill the gap and ran out of money because there isn’t any money,” Weeg said. “Free clinics and community health centers all help to some degree, but we are all part of a bigger broken system. The reality is that we have a quarter million people in Idaho without health insurance, and that will grow as the unemployment rate grows.

“This is the only economically developed country that doesn’t have some kind of universal coverage. Are we, as a country, willing to move in that direction and do we have the political will to do it?”