

Merced County, Health Clinic Vie For State Grant

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MERCED — There will be more than 2,000 births in Merced County this year and competition has developed between the county and an independent, non-profit corporation headquartered in south Merced for a state grant to help provide prenatal care for expectant mothers.

The county Board of Supervisors and the corporation's board of directors Tuesday agreed to form an ad hoc committee to try to "coordinate and cooperate" in their health care efforts, but the agreement is too late to avoid the conflict in vying for the grant.

The grant has gone to the county the past three years and the county has applied for \$60,000 under the Title 5 program for fiscal 1979-80.

However, this time Merced-Stanislaus Family Health Centers Inc., which has operated a clinic in Los Banos since 1976 and a clinic in Merced since 1972, is seeking \$110,000 under the same program and is in direct conflict with the county.

There is little or no chance that the state will approve both grants, says Health Department Administrator Ken Masuda.

"The competition is healthy," says Mike Sullivan, administrator of the Merced Family Health Center. The corporation's clinic in Los Banos is

Nueva Esperanza and a third clinic is located in Patterson in Stanislaus County.

The county does not necessarily agree that applying for two grants will be beneficial, and one county official said there is a good chance both will be turned down.

County supervisors Al Goman of Gustine and Ann Klinger of Merced say their board, "as the governing body of the county, should have the responsibility for the health and welfare of the residents of the county.

"We have a responsibility to the total population of the county," adds Mrs. Klinger.

The Merced-Stanislaus corporation disagrees.

Sullivan contends the Title 5 program was a three-year program and the county no longer is entitled to receive funds.

According to Sullivan, former County Health Officer Dr. Donald Rice admitted this in a letter to the state a year ago, saying he understood the county at that time was on the last cycle of funding under the program.

Sullivan says his corporation was "invited and encouraged" by the state to apply for the funds. "As far as I know," he adds, "the county can't even apply."

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Masuda said the county is applying for a new three-year cycle, with the \$60,000 for the first year of the new phase.

Both sides claim their program does the best job.

According to the county, its program "is designed to serve all pregnant women in the county" and can do this through its clinics in Dos Palos, Los Banos, Livingston and Merced, the Family Practice Residency Program at Merced Community Medical Center, the Livingston Community Health Services and by having public health nurses available in nearly all communities.

Sullivan says his clinics provide care to those women who really need it — the poor and underserved who can't get help from private physicians.

This includes a high percentage of seasonal and migrant farmworkers, the Spanish speaking who feel more comfortable going to the corporation's clinics.

The 19-member corporation's board includes three consumers from

each of five areas — Planada-Le Grand, Merced, Dos Palos-Los Banos, Atwater-Livingston and Patterson.

With this board makeup and the majority of the members bilingual, Sullivan, contends his clinic can better seek out the women who really need help.

There has been some criticism that the corporation concentrates too much on this segment of the population and does not provide service to the whole county.

Sullivan says this isn't so, that the clinics are open to everyone.

He points out that the board members are elected by patients who actually use the clinics and the average number of votes for any of the elections has been about 200.

He said election boxes are kept open for five days, with three board members elected at one time to staggered terms.

He answered one criticism that a director was elected by only four votes by saying the "opportunity was

there" for the voters."

According to Sullivan, the board meeting of his corporation are conducted in Spanish and English, not just English alone as claimed by some critics.

"We represent the community. We're much closer to the people and can serve them better than the county," adds Sullivan.

Sullivan has his own criticisms of the county Health Department, that there is no health director or nursing director.

The supervisors are in the process now of screening candidates for the director's post.

The corporation's clinics in Merced and Los Banos also provide other types of medical care, including dental, and served more than 7,000 patients in 1978, according to federal records.

These statistics showed about 70 to 75 percent of the patients were seasonal or migrant farmworkers.

Sullivan says his corporation at one time was able to work with the

county in Los Banos and that his board developed a prenatal effort with the county but this effort "apparently was thrown in the waste basket" by the county.

"If the county wants to have a maternal care program it should have one," says Sullivan, "but not with state funds."

If the county fails to get the \$60,000 grant, it will be up to the supervisors to decide the future of the maternal care program, says Masuda. He declined to say whether the county could continue the program without the additional money.

Under the corporation's program, transportation is provided for those wanting to get to Merced or Los Banos. The clinics are open five days and two evenings a week.

Medical staff includes a dentist, the equivalent of 3.5 physicians, a nurse practitioner, registered nurses, vocational nurses, laboratory technicians and a nutritionist.

The state's decision on awarding the funding is expected in the next few weeks.