

Merced group will take over two clinics

Closure of two health care clinics in west Modesto and Empire will be stayed off for at least three months.

The clinics, operated by the Stanislaus County Medical Society, were to lose their federal funding at the end of this month.

But the Merced Family Health Center, which is displacing the medical society in operation of another center in Patterson could use some of its federal grant money to pay staff salaries in Modesto and Empire as well, Gil Tunison, of the federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare told the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors Tuesday.

"I assure you now I can place enough pressure on the Merced group to pick up staff salaries for a short period of time . . . three to six months," Tunison pledged.

The medical society has been operating the centers as nurse-care clinics, a project which began 10 years ago to provide health screening and referral services to private physicians for migrant workers.

Over the years the number of migrant users has declined, and federal regulations have been changed. The changes included a transition to doctor staffed clinics and establishment of consumer groups, made up primarily of people using the clinics, as policy makers to control operation of the centers. The medical society opposed both changes and was "terminated," as Tunison put it, as the grant recipient for operating the clinics.

He said he authorized a \$190,000 payment to the Merced group Monday to provide low income health care on the west side of the county. He said the Merced group would change its name and bring Stanislaus County residents into the policy making board to reflect its new, regional responsibilities.

Initially the HEW funding did not include provision for continuing the Empire and west Modesto clinics, but an appeal launched by the Rev.

Harold Knowles resulted in Tunison's pledge for an extension.

He warned, though, that the persons wanting continuation of the clinics will have to try to work out continued funding with the Merced group on their own. "I can't dictate the arrangements."

Even if the clinics in Modesto and Empire eventually close, said Supervisor Joash Paul, the Scenic General Hospital clinic and Hughson satellite clinic are reasonably close.

And the county health department will continue to offer monthly well baby clinics, immunization programs and child health and disability examinations serving both Modesto and Empire, added Deputy Administrator Gardner Hutchins.

There have been two clinics on the west side of the county; one in Patterson and one in Westley. The Merced group will consolidate the west side operation in one clinic in Patterson.