

MOMobile health clinic seeks funds for survival

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Staff hoping to find supporter
as county adheres to budget cuts

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Because of county budget cuts, the MOMobile is scheduled to grind to a halt next month after taking health care to underserved neighborhoods for 10 years.

But the owner of the clinic-on-wheels is talking with a prospective partner in hopes of jump-starting the program before anyone misses it.

"The MOMobile clinic is serving the neediest of the needy right now," said Steve Spriggs, executive director of the Doctors Medical Center Foundation. That group has run the service in cooperation with the Stanislaus County Health Services Agency.

"We are trying to find someone to step into the shoes of the county."

Early this year, the county informed the foundation it couldn't support the \$248,000-a-year program after June 30. The county, which has provided the clinical staff and other support, later agreed to extend funding through Dec. 31, giving the foundation more time to find a partner.

The foundation is talking with Merced-based Golden Valley Health Centers, which is exploring the idea of taking over Stanislaus County's role.

The Doctors Medical Center Foundation also faces increased costs for insurance, vehicle registration, oil changes and other maintenance, all of which the county covered.

"I think our concern is for health-care access and what is going to happen to the population being served," said Michael Sullivan, executive director of Golden Valley, an agency with 15 medical and seven dental clinics in Stanislaus and Merced counties.

"It is a fairly well-utilized service at the four locations. So it makes sense to us not to leave

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MOMOBILE: Clinic backers say its health function is vital

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those folks out there without care."

The vehicle, resembling a Greyhound bus without windows, stops once a week at Del Rio Mobile Home Park and Shackelford School in Modesto and Keyes Elementary School, and twice a week at Orville Wright School in southeast Modesto.

The four-member staff provides exams to people who can't drive to a clinic. It provides immunizations for children and care for pregnant women.

"We do everything except X-rays and surgeries," said Joyce Nolan, who doubles as driver and registration clerk.

"We are the first line of defense. Our function is to keep the load off the emergency rooms and to keep everyone well and happy."

The clinic was launched as the Maternity Outreach Mobile to address an usually high rate of premature births in the county.

Over time, it evolved into more of a primary care clinic, so the name was changed to Medical Outreach Mobile.

"We would pretty much replicate what is happening now," Sullivan said.

Patient visits have dropped from 5,033 in 1999-00, when a one-time grant paid for outreach to labor camps, to 2,184 last fiscal year. About 67 percent of patients are covered by Medi-Cal.

David Jones, a spokesman for

the Health Services Agency, said the county lost close to \$300,000 on the program over the past four years.

Golden Valley is eligible for higher reimbursements for care than the county because it is a federally licensed organization and part of the national safety net for the uninsured.

If an agreement can be worked out with the foundation, Golden Valley would try to get federal approval to take over the clinical side of the MOMobile by year's end.

The foundation also needs to find the money to buy replacement parts for the vehicle. It recently shelled out \$15,000 to replace the generator on the custom-built engine, Spriggs said.

The Doctors Medical Center Foundation is a nonprofit organization with its own board of directors. The financial troubles of hospital owner Tenet Health-care have reduced the company's funding to the foundation by 60 percent, Spriggs said.

The director said it's worth the effort to keep the MOMobile rolling.

"If we can prevent one premature birth, it has more than paid for itself," he said, noting that hospital care for an infant born early can cost \$100,000 to \$500,000.

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