

Clinic's closure opposed

Le Grand defends its medical facility

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LE GRAND - Six miles doesn't seem like much distance, but the people of Le Grand have come to believe its far, far away.

"It doesn't really make much sense," said Vicki Martinez, reacting to the impending closure of the Golden Valley Health Centers clinic in Le Grand and its consolidation with the clinic in Planada. "Six miles is a great distance when you don't have any transportation."

Martinez was among a large group of concerned Le Grand residents who went before Golden Valley's Board of Directors last week in Merced to plead for the extended life of the community clinic.

"This makes it very difficult for our people - many of them Hispanic or elderly - to get to the clinic in Planada," she said. "When they do, the Planada clinic is already crowded and they won't get the same immediate care."

The closure, effective May 31, was announced two weeks ago by Golden Valley board chairperson Alicia Dicochea. She said the board's action was based on the "tremendous changes sweeping the healthcare industry, especially the reduction in Medi-Cal reimbursements to doctors providing medical care for the poor."

Golden Valley, which currently operates 14 clinics (six in Merced County; eight in Stanislaus County), also intends to close a clinic in Turlock and the Women's Health Clinic on McHenry Road in Modesto.

"Closing these facilities was a very difficult decision for our board," Dicochea said. "But, in

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order to continue to provide quality healthcare for all of our patients and to provide access to healthcare for the poor and uninsured, these cost-cutting measures were necessary."

Mike Sullivan, Golden Valley's chief executive officer, described two of the closures more as consolidations than closures. "The board did not want to close these clinics," he said, adding "financially, we have not had a very good year."

Sullivan also cited Medi-Cal reimbursements, both the amount and time for processing, and the gradual transition to managed care as major contribu-

tors to Golden Valley's financial problems.

He also said Golden Valley no longer can depend on government grants to cover operational costs, describing them as stagnant and unchanging.

The citizens of Le Grand argue that the need of the community, which consists of nearly 80 percent minority, should override cost factors.

"The closing of rural health clinics, who serve the agricultural industry, is a very disturbing event here in Merced County," said Robin Flournoy, president of the Merced County Chamber of Commerce. "With agriculture being our No. 1 industry, it follows that our major employers

are ag-related and based in the county. The employees live in the county and rely on local clinics to take care of their needs."

Sullivan suggested the citizens need to address the issue of Medi-Cal reimbursement with their legislators.

"None of us like the fact that the state continues to cut our payments, even as we see more and more underserved patients," Dicochea said. "But we will do what is necessary to continue to meet our mission, which is to improve the health status of our patients by providing quality managed primary healthcare services to people in the communities that we serve, regardless of language, financial or cultural barriers."