

Oakley promised a health clinic

● **Contra Costa county, private hospitals all agree community needs a facility; financing unresolved**

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OAKLEY -- A community group pushing for a health clinic in Oakley won a promise from the county and private hospitals this week to try to make it happen.

But many questions remain, including how much a clinic would cost, how it would be financed and whether the coalition can agree on a plan.

Despite the uncertainties, the pledges won a standing ovation from more than 300 people who packed St. Anthony's Church on Monday night.

"Most of our youth group and the people in our parish don't have health coverage, so they are waiting to the last minute to go to the (hospital) ER," said Lizette Suarez, who led the meeting sponsored by Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization.

The group is made up of 25 religious congregations representing 35,000 families.

Although the county has a health clinic in Brentwood, getting there can be difficult for working families with one car, residents noted.

They also pointed out that Oakley has some of the county's highest death rates from heart disease, cancer and stroke.

Among those pledging to work on bringing a clinic to town were Dr. William Walker, director of Contra Costa Health Services, county Supervisor Federal Glover, and representatives of the John Muir Community Health Alliance, Sutter Delta Medical Center, Kaiser Permanente and La Clinica de La Raza.

The private hospitals are usually vigorous competitors. But it makes sense to team up when caring for those who lack coverage, said Lynn Baskett, executive director of the John Muir Community Health Alliance.

"None of us has the resources to take care of everyone who is uninsured," she said.

The interfaith group released a report this week detailing the results of a survey of 500 people who attend St. Anthony's Church.

Nearly 40 percent were uninsured, and two-thirds said they had never heard of the Contra Costa Health Plan, which provides coverage for low-income residents. The group called the plan "one of the county's best kept secrets."

Walker acknowledged that the county has not had the resources to do much outreach. But that will soon change, he said, because the county has learned it will receive a \$15.3 million grant annually for the next three years to expand the program.

At the interfaith group's urging, Walker also pledged he would try to extend the enrollment period for the Contra Costa Health Plan from six months to a year. Having to re-enroll every six months is a burden for many families, the group said.

The promises came after residents spoke about the difficulty of seeking medical care while uninsured.

Maria Suarez said she rushed her 3-year-old daughter to the hospital after she hit her head. The doctor asked if she had insurance. When she told him no, the doctor said her daughter didn't need any medical tests.

It turned out her daughter was fine, Suarez said, but "it was a risk. We were very scared. She was vomiting."

Other residents told about having to wait until insured patients were seen before they received treatment, or having no idea how to pay for needed care for life-threatening conditions.

The interfaith group's survey found that 24 percent of respondents had a medical condition for which they were not receiving treatment.

"We must be very clear that this issue is bigger than just Contra Costa County," Glover told the crowd.

Group members called on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state lawmakers to work together to expand health care access for the uninsured. They also urged Congress to reauthorize and strengthen the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Schwarzenegger has vowed to make health care reform a top priority this year. His representative received a standing ovation from the crowd.

Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Alamo, and state Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, also sent staffers to the meeting.

But Assemblyman Guy Houston, R-Livermore, declined to attend or send a representative. Group leaders had residents sign postcards to send to him expressing their disappointment.

Suarez said Tuesday she realizes more work remains before a clinic becomes a reality.

"We will have follow-up meetings with them," she said.

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