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Psychiatric unit closure will have big impacts

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The Petaluma Health Care District board's concern over countywide mental-health care intensified Feb. 14 when Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital officials announced plans to close their inpatient psychiatric unit in 60 days.

"I knew the unit had staffing issues, but I didn't know anything about these plans until I received a 'heads up' notification from St. Joseph Health System (the owner of the hospital) that afternoon," said Daymon Doss, CEO of the Petaluma Health Care District. "This certainly puts everyone in high gear to try to deal with the situation." On Feb. 14, St. Joseph Health System of Sonoma County announced plans to close the 38-bed psychiatric unit, along with the 31-bed skilled nursing unit opposite SRMH and a 15-bed acute rehabilitation unit on the hospital's Fulton Road campus. St. Joseph officials estimate that 212 employees, representing 7 percent of its total workforce in Sonoma County, would be laid off, and that this would result in a budgetary reduction of \$7.7 million.

St. Joseph emphasizes that the closures will allow it to improve its financial situation while refocusing resources on core medical services, but Sonoma County Supervisor Mike Kerns of Petaluma questions if they indicate a bigger financial problem.

"With the possible closing of Sutter, I'm wondering if Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital will have the capacity to pick up its services," Kerns said.

Closure of the psychiatric facility is particularly critical, because the only other one in the area, operated by the county, is scheduled to shut down in June. This will directly and substantially affect residents of Petaluma and other parts of Sonoma County in need of mental-health care.

General medical practitioners who focus on psychiatric care as only a small part of their training will need to be much more involved, along with law enforcement personnel.

"Some patients might need to be transferred out of the county for a period of time," Doss said.

And some critics contend that mental-health patients who should be in a hospital bed will end up in a jail cell. The PHCD board, after hiring consultant Sharon Jackson of Health Marketing & Management in Mill Valley to do a survey of the county's mental health system, now will need to revisit issues related to available services. After completing the first part of her survey in October, Jackson concluded that Sonoma County has or soon will have all the major elements of a creative, effective system of acute mental-health services, but that stake holders are not sufficiently engaged in the planning for new services and are confused about what is available.

"That first finding depends on the availability of psychiatric hospital beds," Doss said.

St. Joseph's announcement took not only Doss, but many other local health-care officials, off guard, a la Sutter Medical Center's announcement in January 2007 that it was closing its Chanate Road facility, and that it had signed a letter of intent with SRMH to take over its services.

The inpatient psychiatric unit has been losing money, and now has only two traveling psychiatrists and one part-time psychiatrist, compared with eight psychiatrists at one point. Many local psychiatrists have struggled to build their practice due to low Medicare reimbursement rates and the high cost of living, among other things.

"The financial aspects are difficult for a new psychiatrist, but not as bad for someone who has an established practice," said Scott Borschack, who practices in Petaluma and Marin County.

Several local health officials emphasized that a determined, collaborative effort will be necessary to try to fill the gap left by the closure of SRMH's inpatient psychiatric unit.

"All of the key partners need to come together to determine what steps can be taken," Doss said.

"Any solution will need to involve a lot of partners," said Jim Suver, PVH's vice president of operations and chief administrator. "But we also need governmental and community support. Mental health is a statewide problem." (Contact Dan Johnson at dan.johnson@arguscourier.com)

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