

Contra Costa draws on reserve money to support health clinics

By Matthias Gafni CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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MARTINEZ — Hoping to change how it provides health care for the poor, Contra Costa County supervisors on Tuesday ordered a study of how to sustain the increasingly expensive services.

At the same time, the board also agreed to take \$1.5 million from its reserves to bolster county health clinics, which expect an influx of patients.

Supervisors, who would use reserves for such a study, agreed to let the county administrator report back on the cost — perhaps \$250,000 — and timing of such a study.

"We have a problem with health care here in the county," Chairwoman Susan Bonilla of Concord said. "We have a very fragile health care system."

The supervisors approved spending \$1.5 million in reserve money to support the county's health clinics, which expects an estimated 5,500 undocumented adults who will no longer receive most nonemergency care. The board eliminated nonemergency health care for them last month to save an estimated \$6 million a year.

The supervisors, who needed a 4/5th majority to spend the reserves, voted unanimously for the one-time funding, which will bridge a gap until a six-year, \$6 million Chevron grant kicks in.

The money could pay for an estimated three primary care visits a year for the newly uncovered population. Bonilla said she hoped taking money from the reserves would prompt systemic change.

"It's a one-time expense, but I want it to be more than plugging a hole and instead offering a solution," said Bonilla, who suggested the sustainability audit.

The board expects before the end of the fiscal year it will have to deal with an estimated \$1.5 million county hospital deficit. Health services has an additional \$8.6 million budget hole that it hopes to fill with federal stimulus cash.

"I feel we need to take a realistic look at the challenges facing us here with local health care access in Contra Costa County," she said. "The risk we run if we don't plan strategically is we'll remain in a state of constant crisis and we'll put the system in danger of failure."

Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond asked the health services director to meet with clinics and county hospitals and return in six months with a sustainability funding program.

Reach Matthias Gafni at 925-952-5053 or mgafni@bayareanewsgroup.com.