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### STRETCHED THIN : Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics in make-or-break territory

SONIA FERNANDEZ, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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When Alana Tillim graduated from college, she faced the dilemma many people just starting out face: no access to affordable health care. The work she got didn't offer benefits and individual plans were pricey. "I needed a place to go; I couldn't go to Student Health anymore," she said.

Her search led to the Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics, a network of four facilities dedicated to working with the underinsured and underserved populations in the community, those who can't afford to pay the premiums or get access through their employment. There, she said, she got health care at least on par with the major providers in this town.

"The clinicians are underpaid, and the population they see is underserved but their hearts are incredibly large and the care that they give is phenomenal," said Ms. Tillim, who now owns and runs Santa Barbara Dance Arts, but still chooses to stick with her doctors at the neighborhood clinics and is on their board.

Ms. Tillim and roughly 16,000 others received the care they needed last year from the clinics, a number that continues to rise as the economy takes its toll on people's jobs and paychecks. No one is turned away for inability to pay. But now, the organization that has been the health safety net for the community is in need of a little help of its own. Due to a lethal combination of budget cutbacks, increases in patient population and delayed reimbursements, Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics is facing the possibility of fewer hours of operations and perhaps even shutdowns.

"It's like a perfect storm," said SBNC Deputy Director Bonnie Campbell. They have seen "astronomical increases" in their costs: a 37 percent increase in the price of the health insurance they provide to employees, a 16 percent increase in the cost of medical supplies. On top of that, because more people seem to be falling through the health insurance cracks these days, they see 400 new patients every month over their typical caseload.

As if that weren't enough, almost \$700,000 in reimbursements from the state of California are likely to be withheld given expected delays in adopting the budget in time for the start of the next fiscal year, less than a week away. Donors, who in the past have contributed regularly to the nonprofit, have been unable to assist.

"This time around we're seeing donors unable to donate funds that we usually get," said SBNC Executive Director Cynder Sinclair. "I'm looking at the budget and wondering what we're going to have to do to at least keep our doors open."

A network of three neighborhood clinics and one dental clinic, located strategically near the populations it serves, Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics has been around for decades. Roughly two-thirds of the population the Clinics serves live below the Federal poverty line, are Hispanic, are under the age of 35, or any combination of the three. More than half are women and just over a third are children.

"We can say that everyone in this community has access to excellent health care regardless of their ability to pay," said Ms. Sinclair. Those who can pay any amount, do, but often the Clinics foot the bill, which averages out to \$154 per visit, but only around \$65 of which they get back in reimbursements, grants or donations.



Medical Director Dr. Neil Sullivan and Deputy Director Bonnie Campbell of Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics are pictured in front of the clinic at 915 North Milpas Street.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS



In the photos above, community members take advantage of the variety of services offered by Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics.



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SBNC is at a "tipping stage," even after the planned reductions in hours and services, in addition to staff layoffs and furloughs the organization instituted for the upcoming fiscal year. This does not bode well for the thousands of people the clinics serve, who will likely have nowhere else to go, except the emergency room.

"The ironic part of the delivery system right now is that people can have access to the most expensive part of it by just showing up at the hospital in the emergency room," said Dr. Kurt Ransohoff, CEO, President and Medical Director of Sansum Clinic. "And it's terribly expensive and terribly inconvenient for things that sometimes don't need to wind up there." Providers like Sansum, Cottage and the county Public Health department, which has gone through its own cutbacks, collaborate in a system of public health that reaches out to treat problems in the community before more serious measures need to be taken.

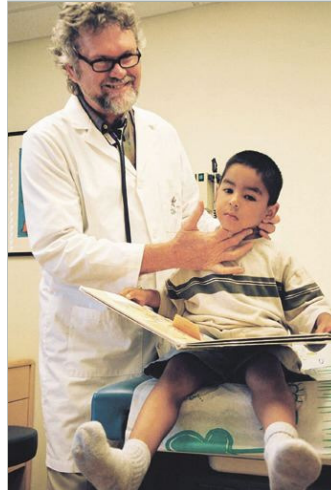
This precarious situation comes as SBNC is amid efforts to implement a sustainability plan to both decrease expenses and increase efficiency and productivity. Measures the organization is taking include conversion to an electronic medical records system, diversifying revenue streams and negotiating increased reimbursement rates. It's a program they are hoping will reduce costs without compromising service.

But without help now, according to Ms. Campbell, the bottom of the community's health care net may drop out.

"It's really a make or break situation," she said.

For additional information visit: [www.sbclinics.com](http://www.sbclinics.com)

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