

Dentists: Less state funding means less service

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After 30 years of treating patients, Lewiston dentist Michael Flynn is faced with having to do something he has rarely done -- turn people away.

Flynn said a proposed cut in state reimbursements for clinics that treat low-income patients means he will have to shut his doors to some of these clients to keep his business afloat.

"What it will mean to our office is we will have to reduce the number of people (on medical assistance) we see from surrounding counties," he said.

The \$6.2 million cut to the state's critical-access dental program is part of Gov. Tim Pawlenty's proposal to balance the state budget. The Republican governor plans to use his executive authority of "unallotment" to cut \$2.7 billion from the budget to bring it into balance. The move comes after he and the DFL-led legislature were unable to reach a budget deal. The cuts would take effect April 1, 2010.

Critics of the proposed dental cut warn that it could drive some of the state's dentists out of business and make it tougher for low-income patients to get needed dental care.

Dick Dierks, executive director of the Minnesota Dental Association, said the association proposed the critical-access payments in 2001 as a way to help improve access to dental care for low-income Minnesotans. To qualify for a reimbursement, at least 20 percent of a clinic's patients must be on a public program.

Dierks said these cuts could result in the loss of dentists and an increase in patients struggling to get care. And that would likely lead to higher costs for the entire health system.

"If a patient can't get dental care through a normal fashion, then they end up going to the emergency room when they have oral pain, and that is expensive to the system and doesn't solve the dental problem," he said.

Even before the proposed payment cut, Flynn has had a tough time making the books balance, he said. On a recent Monday after a vacation, 44 people had signed up for appointments at Lewiston's Midwest Dental. He estimated that after a long day of work, he would provide a total of \$12,000 in care but receive only \$4,500. With the new cut, that imbalance is likely to get worse, he said.

"My employees deserve better than this," he said. "They have not gotten any raises for the last three years."

A 20 percent pay cut

A Blooming Prairie clinic that treats low-income patients exclusively is bracing for a significant financial hit as a result of the cuts. Dr. John Flor, with Main Street Dental, said the clinic's dentists are considering a 20 percent pay cut to help keep the facility open.

"If we can't make money, there is nobody to bail us out," Flor said. "So if you can't make money and you can't pay your bills, then you have to quit."

The clinic serves 15,000 patients across southern Minnesota; 40 percent of them come from Olmsted County. Main Street Dental gets reimbursed 63 cents for every \$1 spent treating patients on the state's medical assistance program. If Pawlenty's cut takes effect, the reimbursement would drop to 50 cents for every \$1.

Flor said he believes the clinic can stay open if the reimbursement cut is limited to this budget cycle. But if rates do not increase, he said, it becomes a question of how long the clinic's dentists are willing to get paid less while working harder.

"We think we can survive, and we are going to do our best to survive," he said. "If it turns out that at the end of next year that we've actually lost money and if the doctors aren't willing to take another cut in pay, then we will have to shut down."

Effect still unknown

The Salvation Army's Good Samaritan Dental Clinic in Rochester is also bracing for less funding. But it is unclear how big the loss will be, said Dan Mersel, Good Samaritan Health Clinic business coordinator. Mersel said roughly 12 percent of the clinic's funding comes from the critical-access payment, and he is still trying to determine how much that will get cut.

The dental clinic serves Olmsted County residents who are uninsured or on publicly funded programs, seeing an average of 1,200 patients a year. Mersel said the clinic will likely have to look to other means, such as fundraising, to fill the hole left by state cuts. This comes at a time when the economy means more dental patients coming to the clinic.

He said, "I'm beginning to hear stories of 'I've lost my job, lost my insurance' with a frequency I probably hadn't heard several years ago."