

Task force taking up indigent care

Panel meeting tonight studying costs, ways of expanding services

By ED HOUSEWRIGHT
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McKINNEY — Ray Coleman could use some help.

The low-income health clinic he founded last year has been swamped with patients — a sign, he says, of the need for more indigent medical services in Collin County.

COLLIN COUNTY

Tonight, a health care task force appointed by county commissioners holds its second meeting as it studies ways to expand public care — and the associated cost.

“More needs to be done,” said Mr. Coleman, chief executive officer of Tapestry Healthcare. “Sitting back and bashing the county about what is not be-

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ing done is not going to solve anything. People need to come to the table with level heads and try to find a solution.”

Commissioners say they're optimistic that the 25-member task force can come up with an effective, affordable plan to care for more poor sick people. A research team from the University of Texas at Dallas is providing assistance.

“We've asked them to figure out the impact of providing more health care today, and how big the problem is going to be in 20 or 25 years,” Commissioner Jerry Hoagland said. “I think they're on the right track.”

In recent years, commissioners have been criticized for not spending more on indigent health care. To qualify for free treatment in Collin County, a family of four can earn no more than \$9,675 a year. Last year, the county treated 192 poor people at a cost of \$909,481.

This year, commissioners awarded a total of \$147,500 in grants to five private clinics. Mr. Coleman's clinic near the McKinney square received \$25,000.

“It was gone that month — literally,” he said. “But every little bit helps.”

Tapestry has treated 1,829 uninsured patients since it opened in February 2004, Mr. Coleman said. Patients are charged a sliding fee based on their income. The clinic's other funds come from a state grant and private donations, he said.

The small waiting room at the clinic — a former pizza restaurant — is often standing room only. One woman there on Wednesday said she had been to the clinic three times for high blood pressure.

Without the clinic, she said, she wouldn't know where to turn.

“I probably wouldn't see a doctor because I couldn't afford it,” said Shirley, who declined to give her last name.

Commissioner Joe Jaynes said the county needs to partner

more with local doctors and hospitals to meet rising health care needs.

“Spread the responsibility around — as opposed to just throwing taxpayer dollars at it,” Mr. Jaynes said.

The task force will meet from 6 to 9 tonight at Annex B next to the county courthouse on McDonald Street. Panel members will receive reports from the UTD consultants and county health department officials, county spokeswoman Leigh Hornsby said.

“They will give task force members a very detailed history of health care in Collin County,” she said. “They also will look at the broad overview of health care — nationally, at the state level and what's going on in counties.”

Residents are invited to attend but will not be allowed to speak, Ms. Hornsby said. Public hearings to solicit input will be scheduled later, she said. The task force will present its recommendations to commissioners in about a year.

Some community groups have suggested that commissioners raise taxes to fund additional services. Others have chided the county for not spending more from its health care trust fund.

Collin County had a public hospital, similar to Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, until 1984. Commissioners then sold the facility for \$13 million and used the money to create a trust fund.

The fund balance reached \$20 million in 2000, but it has steadily declined with higher health care spending and lower interest earnings, officials say. The total is expected to fall to \$6 million by 2008, they say.

“We could dip into that fund, but if we keep going the way we're going now, it's going to be almost depleted in less than 10 years,” Mr. Jaynes said. “Then we're back to square one. We need to think more long term.”

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