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Fresno County struggles to keep psychiatrists

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Fresno County might be forced to close the only program it has that keeps poor, mentally ill patients out of hospitals. Why? There aren't enough psychiatrists.

At stake is the future of the 16-bed Psychiatric Health Facility at the former University Medical Center in southeast Fresno.

If it closes, it would be the latest blow to a mental-health system that already has seen deep program cuts.

None of those cuts resulted in the layoffs of psychiatrists. They're leaving on their own. Just five years ago, the county had 21 psychiatrists devoted to adult care. Today, there are just three -- including one who works part-time. The county struggles to fill the gaps with expensive hourly help.

"We've gone from a bad situation to a critically bad situation," said Curtis A. Thornton, chairman of the Fresno County Mental Health Board, which advises county supervisors on mental-health issues.

Hospital officials say closing the Psychiatric Health Facility would affect everybody, because there would be longer waits in emergency departments.

But the county has had little luck recruiting new doctors -- or retaining those who sign on.

There is a shortage of psychiatrists in the county for private-pay patients, but it's worse for the low-income clients the county serves, who don't have private insurance and can't afford to pay for the care themselves.

Some of the reasons psychiatrists shun working for the county are financial, county officials say. The doctors can earn far more at the state's prisons and at private institutions. And psychiatrists have their pick of where to practice in California, and the Valley is not their first choice.

But, for once, money is not the only factor. Many are disillusioned by a county mental-health system that has chopped programs and laid off mental-health workers, psychiatrists say.

"There's still a fair number of fairly altruistic people who feel an obligation to work in the county mental-health system," said Dr. Scott Ahles, chief of psychiatry at the UCSF-

Fresno Medical Education Program. "But at a certain point, a sense of futility seems to settle in, and people start leaving."

Only a handful

The county's mental-health system has been rocked by budget problems in the last few years.

To save money, the county has closed or scaled back outpatient clinics in recent years and has limited psychiatric care to only the most seriously ill.

Last July, it closed its psychiatric crisis-intervention center. The center provided short-term help for the mentally ill who were experiencing a mental-health crisis. They stayed there an average of about eight hours.

And now the inpatient unit, where patients remain for an average of five days, is threatened.

The county is keeping the center open by piecemeal, said Donna Taylor, director of the county's Behavioral Health Department. It makes it difficult to attract a psychiatrist to work there, she said.

In the last couple of months, two psychiatrists have left the county. One took a job at Corcoran State Prison and the other retired, Taylor said.

That's left Fresno County with Dr. Robert Ensom and Dr. Mayur Amin as the two full-time psychiatrists.

Ensom stepped down as medical director May 14. He continues to do some administrative duties. He chose to leave the post, he said, because "I couldn't do my job without the resources to do it."

Before the two psychiatrists left earlier this year, Ensom said he calculated that the county was short at least two full-time doctors. After the doctors' departures, Ensom said, he was concerned about patients running out of medications and suffering harm. "I didn't want to be held responsible for that," he said.

Hourly paid psychiatrists have helped fill the void, and patient needs are being met now, he said. But he anticipates problems as more patients need medication refills.

The county has money in its current budget for five full-time psychiatrists and a nurse practitioner for adults and for four full-time psychiatrists and two nurse practitioners for children, Taylor said. But recruiting full-time psychiatrists hasn't been successful.

To keep the inpatient Psychiatric Health Facility open, Taylor has had to resort to hiring doctors who are paid hourly per day to work on a temporary basis. It's a short-term -- and expensive -- solution.

Statewide, the average hourly wage for a psychiatrist is \$73, according to a 2009 mental-health work force study by the Center for the Health Professions at the University of California at San Francisco.

The salaries of the county's full-time psychiatrists range from about \$73 to \$83 an hour. They are paid every two weeks and receive between \$6,339 and \$7,216, Taylor said.

But temporary workers get paid a lot more. Fresno County pays them between \$105 and \$120 an hour, Taylor said. And that amount can increase to \$300 to \$600 an hour for being on-call to tend to patients on evenings and weekends -- when many of them are needed.

Job offers

There's lot of competition for psychiatrists in the Valley.

In 2008, there were 6,439 psychiatrists in California and only 205 of them were in the area between Merced and Bakersfield, according to the Center for the Health Professions report. The majority of psychiatrists were clustered in the Bay Area and Los Angeles County.

One institution that needs psychiatrists: the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, which has five prisons in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Psychiatrists began leaving the county for prison jobs starting about five years ago, Ensom said. That was about the same time a federal judge placed the state's prison health services under a receivership to improve inmate health care.

"Doctors who have left here were told they would be paid \$220,000 a year up to \$240,000 a year," Ensom said.

An independent, contracting psychiatrist working in California's prisons can earn about \$240 an hour, said Dr. Michael DeLollis, a psychiatrist in private practice in Fresno. "There's no way the county can match that," he said.

The prison system isn't the only attractive employment option, either.

Private institutions take their share of graduates from the UCSF-Fresno psychiatry residency program, said Ahles, the chief of psychiatry. The program has a capacity for 16 residents, training four residents a year in a four-year program. The program relies on doctors in the community, such as DeLollis, to teach residents, he said.

Residents often take employment where they are trained, he said. The county's shortage of psychiatrists has limited the number of psychiatry residents who are trained by county psychiatrists.

Newly trained psychiatrists are being snatched by the Veterans Affairs hospital and Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Fresno, where they were trained, Ahles said. "And we ourselves hire a number of people to stay on the faculty here," he said.

Only one psychiatrist -- Dr. Herbert Cruz -- oversees four residents one day a week for the county at the clinic in Selma, Taylor said. The county used to train residents at the Psychiatric Health Facility and outpatient clinics in Fresno.

Cruz hasn't worked full time for the county for years. The pay is terrible, he said. He does it for this reason: "I trained in Fresno County and live in Fresno County and I feel I owe the residents of Fresno County something."

Enticing psychiatrists to come to Fresno County -- and to stay -- can't happen without programs that excite them, psychiatrists said.

"It's not just the money," said Dr. Edgar Castillo, an Exeter children's psychologist. Castillo was Fresno County's chief psychologist for children from 2002 to about 2004.

Psychiatrists will stay "if there is a chance to do something they'd like to do, like research or some teaching or some work in the rural areas -- some speciality area," he said.

Castillo now works for Kaweah Delta Health Care System. He took a job there about six years ago to be the medical director of an adolescent inpatient facility the hospital had hoped to open. That project was scrapped, but Castillo was offered the job of medical director at a new rural clinic in Exeter that he helped develop from the ground up.

The consequences

Hospital emergency departments are feeling the effects of the county's cutbacks, said Lynne Ashbeck, regional vice president of the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California, based in Fresno.

"The cumulative impacts of all the mental health cuts are staggering," Ashbeck said. "In cutting out a little bit at a time, it's taking a toll on all of our local hospitals."

Increased numbers of mentally ill are in emergency departments, resulting in longer waiting times for everyone, she said.

Taylor is evaluating the crisis-intervention clinic's closure and the future of the Psychiatric Health Facility. Hospital admissions have increased since the clinic closure. A review of hospitalizations from August 2008 to April 2009 and August 2009 to this April showed they have increased from 849 to 1,906.

Private hospitalizations are costly to the county. Hospital reimbursement is \$900 a day and physician groups send the county separate bills, Taylor said. Reimbursement for a one-day stay at the county's Psychiatric Health Facility is \$570, she said.

But to keep the Psychiatric Health Facility open requires finding doctors willing to work there.

It's tough duty. Psychiatrists who work in inpatient settings see the most difficult patients, said Amin, who has worked for 18 years at the county facility.

He stays in the job for his patients, Amin said. "My heart and soul is in this place."

Families affected

For mental-health clients and their families, the county's problems have personal consequences.

It used to take two months to see a psychiatrist, but now there is a four-month wait, families say.

Mary Lou Brauti of Fresno said a delay in an appointment with a psychiatrist for her adult son led to his hospitalization earlier this year. He spent about six days at Community Behavioral Health Center in Fresno, she said.

Her son has schizophrenia. He had been well for about seven years until the recent relapse, she said.

He tried to get help, Brauti said. But when he called the county, he couldn't get an appointment with a psychiatrist for more than a month, she said.

It's taking longer and longer to get appointments, Brauti said. Her son used to see a psychiatrist every other month for routine follow-up care. "Now it's once every four months."

And about once a year, he is seen by a new psychiatrist, she said. "He's had four psychiatrists in the last four years who don't know him well," she said.

For another mother, the concern is when her adult son will be assigned a new psychiatrist.

Jane McCoy of Fresno said her 45-year-old son's psychiatrist quit six weeks ago. Her son takes medications prescribed by a psychiatrist. He's done well, she said. But he needs a psychiatrist to manage his care, she said.

A county mental-health worker assured her son that someone would be calling with the names of his new doctor, she said. "So far, my son has not received that call."

Solutions

Thornton of the mental health board said the county's mental-health system is on the brink of a crisis.

"We just can't have business as usual, because business as usual is not working," he said.

It's time the county considered creative solutions, such as offering signing bonuses to psychiatrists for accepting employment and retention incentives to encourage them to stay, he said.

And the county should look at the option of contracting the Psychiatric Health Facility services to a private business, he said. A private contractor would then be responsible for staffing, he said. "And the county would not be scrambling every time you have an unexpected resignation."

No matter what the county does, it won't be easy finding psychiatrists willing to come here, said DeLollis, who has been in private practice in Fresno for almost 20 years.

"The reality is we have a shortage of psychiatrists and even in the hard economic times like this, a psychiatrist has a lot of options where they can go," he said. "Why would you want to go to an understaffed, underfunded program?"

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