

PENINSULA INTERFAITH ACTION
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County called on for health care

BY LIZ HARRELSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Hardworking Peninsula residents too wealthy for welfare and unable to afford health insurance called on county supervisors to create health care programs the working class residents of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties can afford.

It is estimated that 195,000 adults in Santa Clara County and 87,000 adults in San Mateo County are without affordable insurance, according to a UCLA study, with a "vast majority" of them being uninsured workers, said Ev Penzel of the Health Plan of San Mateo to a packed auditorium.

The area's high cost of living, coupled with health insurance many workers can't afford, "leaves a gap through which many families can fall," Penzel said.

Many in the audience knew of the affordable health care plight firsthand, as more than half of the estimated 500 people in attendance stood up when asked if they had ever been unable to afford health insurance.

Alejandra Mendoza, a mother of four children, explained her frustration through a translator at being fired from

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*Health Plan of San Mateo member
Ev Penzel*

her hotel job after she had taken "too much time off for my kids' medical appointments." Mendoza's 10-year-old son suffers from leukemia and requires blood transfusions every four weeks, and two of her children suffer from juvenile diabetes. Upon Mendoza's termination, her family lost its Kaiser medical benefits, she said.

Mendoza thanked the county for providing affordable medical coverage for children through the Healthy Families and Healthy Kids programs, but questioned what her children would do if she got ill — a question that arose after a \$240 trip to a county hospital.

"At that price, I can't afford to go back," said Mendoza.

Supervisor Jerry Hill agreed the health care system is broken at the fed-

eral, state and local levels, noting county hospitals this year will cost \$55 to \$58 million to operate and that cost projections for 2007 are between \$65 and \$70 million.

"That is not sustainable," Hill said.

One proposed affordable health care plan includes funding the plan using hospital district funds, pressuring private, non-profit hospitals to increase their charity care spending, foundation grants and the creation of new federal and state funding, a plan that Hill indicated could work.

"Let's pool them together and create those funds necessary so we are able to enjoy affordable health insurance in San Mateo County," said Hill.

Hill also called for the support of SB 458, which if passed would allow counties to co-sponsor health care plans by in part using federal and state welfare benefit funds.

Felix Alvarez spoke on behalf of Santa Clara County Supervisor Jim Beall, who said the board was investigating developing a large health care plan with discounted rates for all uninsured workers.

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Activists want health care expanded

By Edward Carpenter
Staff Writer

SAN MATEO — Health care advocates Tuesday called on elected officials to expand the county's health insurance plan to cover all low-income working adults in the county.

The insurance would ideally cost about \$200 a month for individuals ages 18 to 64 who aren't covered by other types of insurance for the poor or elderly such as Medi-Cal or Healthy Families, said Robert Fucilla, of the Peninsula Interfaith Alliance, a local faith-based non-profit.

In one scenario, a family of three would have to make less than 400 percent of the federal poverty limit, or about \$64,467 a year, to be eligible. The need for such a program is evident in the fact that there are currently about 87,000 uninsured people in the county, Fucilla said, citing a recent UCLA study.

"We at PIA think that is not good public health," Fucilla said. "We want [supervisors] to make health care a priority and to set aside some money for studies so we can start recording who these people are and what they're being treated for."

Fucilla said that by helping to providing preventive, primary care rather than expensive emergency room care at area hospitals, the county could save tax dollars.

At least one elected official has expressed interest in the plan. Board of Supervisors President Jerry Hill, who was scheduled to attend a presentation of PIA's plan Tuesday night, agreed the county needs to learn more about the uninsured, but said the data

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may be available without spending money on a new study. "The current health care delivery system is broken and needs to be fixed," Hill said.

By expanding the county's current Health Plan of San Mateo, which oversees low-cost health coverage for kids, the elderly and the handicapped, it's conceivable that

individuals and small businesses could be induced to purchase similar insurance, Hill said.

Ultimately, such a plan might be one factor in helping the county reduce the \$55 million it paid in indigent care and other costs to the county-run hospital this fiscal year, Hill said.

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