

State cuts hurt Waco clinic

Planned Parenthood having to reduce women's health services for low-income patients

By **Cindy V. Culp**

Tribune-Herald staff writer

Planned Parenthood of Central Texas has scaled back the number of appointment slots at its government-funded clinic for low-income women in response to cuts in state family planning funding.

As a result, many patients have to wait a week or more to get in.

Felicia Goodman, community affairs director for the local Planned Parenthood, said she fears the backlog may discourage women from making an appointment. Until recently, the clinic had three nurse practitioners and most patients could get a visit within a few

days. As a result of the funding cuts, the clinic now has just one nurse practitioner, she said.

The situation inevitably will result in some patients not receiving needed services, such as birth control, which will drive up the number of Medicaid births, Goodman said.

It also could cause some women to seek out routine care in more expensive settings, which also is not good for taxpayers, she said.

Last year, the clinic served 8,000 women.

"If people have to wait too long, they either give up or they go to the emergency room," Goodman said.

Since the end of the legislative session, women's clinics across the state have been waiting to learn how the cuts would affect them. Family planning funding was slashed from \$111.5 million during the last biennium

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to \$37.9 million for the current two-year budget cycle.

Lawmakers also created a new tiered system for awarding the funds. Organizations that focus on reproductive health, such as Planned Parenthood affiliates, are in the bottom tier.

The top tier includes public health centers that provide a full range of primary health services, including Waco's Family Health Center. But that doesn't necessarily mean the same amount of family planning dollars will continue to flow into the community.

Little additional funding

A subset of public health clinics known as federally qualified health centers have been given preference in funding for a while, said Allen Patterson, Family Health's chief financial and operating officer. But that hasn't resulted in more money for the center, he said.

Taking into account all the cuts in state health care spending this year, the center isn't counting on much, if any, additional funding, Patterson said.

Undoubtedly, Family Health and Planned Parenthood already share some patients, he said.

If more women need to go to Family Health because of Planned Parenthood's funding situation, the center will do everything it can to help them, even if that means building extra capacity as needed, he said.

To help the transition to the new funding structure, the state awarded so-called continuation funding for the first three months of the fiscal year, which started Sept. 1. The local Planned Parenthood got 46 percent of what it had before, Goodman said.

Soon, providers will have to reapply under the new rules, Goodman said. The local office doesn't expect its allotment to increase. In fact, it may go down, she said.

The money goes to services such as well-women exams, birth control and sexually transmitted disease testing. No government money pays for abortions.

Before the cuts, the money represented 49 percent of the local office's total funding for government-supported operations, Goodman said.

Because it was such a large portion, the clinic had to cut the number of nurse practitioners it employs, she said.

The funding situation may get worse, Goodman said. Lawmakers have directed that another funding stream the state controls, the Women's Health Program, be changed so clinics associated with abortion providers can't get any of the money. That would include Planned Parenthood affiliates.

Planned Parenthood is planning to mount a court challenge, Goodman said. She said she hopes that funding from the program will remain the same until the matter is resolved in the court system.

If not, the funding loss would be a huge blow, Goodman said, as money from the program has historically accounted for 40 percent of government-funded services locally.

Merger planned

Although many details about the long-term budget picture are uncertain, it is clear the local office will have to be strategic as it moves into the future, Goodman said.

That is a key reason the local office is planning to merge with the Austin affiliate by the end of the year. That will help eliminate back-office duplication, allowing more of every dollar to be spent directly on patient care, she said.

Another change could be increasing the sliding-fee scale for patients, Goodman said. Most patients at the government-funded clinic pay little or nothing.

But officials want to keep the fees as low as possible to avoid the possibility of women forgoing care due to an inability to pay, Goodman said.

The hope is that once word of the cuts gets out into the community, donations will increase, she said.

"We have always had many, hundreds, of loyal supporters and our hope is that they will continue to be loyal supporters and really come through and know we're looking at long-term, sustainable strategies," Goodman said. "We're not going anywhere."

cculp@wacotrib.com
757-5744