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## An unhealthy outlook?

### Poor will lose big if hospitals shut down

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DAILY NEWS WRITERS

Millions of poor New Yorkers could lose their primary doctors if financially shaky hospitals around the city are closed, a new report issued last week has found.

"If you're going to shut down hospitals, you better figure out how you're going to handle primary care," said Deborah Zahn of the Primary Care Development Corp., which issued the report along with the city's Health and Hospitals Corp.

A state panel studying what health care facilities in New York could be closed or scaled back hasn't looked at how the reductions would affect the city's neediest residents, officials charge.

The report, which studied Medicaid patients' access to primary-care physicians, found "serious shortages," in neighborhoods such as East New York, the Northeast Bronx and the Southeast Queens.

In Canarsie and Flatlands - the neighborhoods where the report found the greatest shortages - about one doctor to serve every 5,000 poor patients.

Interfaith Medical Center in Brooklyn, Mary Immaculate Hospital in Queens and St. Vincent's Hospital Staten Island, all facilities that are reportedly in financial trouble, serve neighborhoods where there are significant shortages, according to Health and Hospitals Corp. data.

"You have people all over the five boroughs who depend on hospitals like this," said Mack Williams, 44, who lives near Interfaith in Bedford-Stuyvesant - which has 3,249 poor patients for each doctor.

"I have five kids and can't afford to go anywhere else," said Yolanda Freeman, 37, outside Interfaith.

"I've been bringing all of them here since they were babies."

In Jamaica, where Mary Immaculate is located, there are 2,301 low-income patients per doctor.

On Staten Island, the city's most medically underserved for poor residents, there were 2,350 poor patients for every doctor.

Hospitals in underserved communities don't make enough money because they serve people without insurance or with insurance that doesn't provide sufficient reimbursements, said the Commission on the Public Health's director Judy Wessler.

"It's not mismanagement, but it's a lack of resources," she said.

More than 75 New York City hospitals have closed in the last 45 years, with the largest clusters in Central Brooklyn and the South Bronx, she said.

Those areas are now federally designated as medically underserved.

The ideal is for all patients to go to clinics instead of hospitals, said Community Service Society health expert Denise Soffel.

"But that's a long-term proposition," she said.

David Sandman, executive director of the governor's Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century, insisted that the panel is taking medical services for the poor into account.

"We realize that hospitals provide range of services including primary care," he said, "especially in poorer neighborhood where there may be few private physicians. We take them into account in our work."

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St. Vincent's Hospital Staten Island (above), Mary Immaculate Hospital (below) and Interfaith Medical Center (bottom) are some of the city institutions serving poor and needy neighborhoods and reportedly in financial trouble.



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