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Health/Science

Hospitals await study

State commission to release report that could recommend closure of health care facilities that are fiscally strapped or have too few patients

BY RIDGELY OCHS
Newsday Staff Writer

November 28, 2006



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Although it has hardly been a household name, the Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century after today is likely to be as hot a topic statewide as former Secretary of State James Baker's Iraq Study Group is nationally.

The commission, created by Gov. George Pataki and the State Legislature, has been working for more than a year on recommendations on which, if any, of the state's more than 200 hospitals should be closed. Today it is scheduled to release its findings, which experts say could have a profound effect on delivery of health care in the state.

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Although the commission has been close-lipped, news reports have listed about a dozen hospitals in New York City as vulnerable, including Cabrini Medical Center in Manhattan, Parkway Hospital in Forest Hills and New York Westchester Square Medical Center in the Bronx.

As for Long Island, Kevin Dahill, head of the Nassau-Suffolk Hospital Council, said he believes local hospitals will not be as heavily affected as some upstate and in the city. "I don't think we have the excess capacity issues that perhaps other regions have," he said.

New York spends more per person than any other state on Medicaid, the state's program for those who can't afford to pay for medical care. In addition, its hospitals and state nursing homes, trying to deal with rapidly changing demographics and medical technology, have struggled financially during the last decade.

The commission, headed by former Social Services Commissioner Stephen Berger, is an attempt to make health care delivery more evenly distributed and to cut costs. That's likely to mean closing or consolidating hospitals that have too few patients and operate on financial margins.

By law, the report's findings are binding unless it is rejected in its entirety by the governor or the legislature in December. Money also is at stake: \$1.5 billion in federal funds over five years has been tied to the state's promise to accept and act on the commission's findings.

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The federal dollars and Gov.-elect Eliot Spitzer's stated support for the commission will propel the commission's recommendations forward, predicted state Sen. Kemp Hannon (R-Garden City), head of the Senate's health committee. But Hannon, who said he will hold a health committee meeting Friday on the report, also predicted the "absolute tension" between people wanting to keep a hospital in their community and re-distributing health care.

"As Winston Churchill put it, this isn't even the end of the beginning," said Bill Van Slyke, spokesman for the Healthcare Association of New York State, which represents hospitals and health care facilities statewide. VanSlyke said much will depend on how policymakers execute the recommendations. "We don't want regional pockets of chaos. ... Our message is that there must be an orderly transition to protect services," he said.

But even rumors of hospital closings, especially upstate, have already set off campaigns by hospitals and cadres of activists.

"This definitely will not be a smooth process; it will be very complicated and painful, painful for a community to lose a hospital in their midst with strong ties to their communities," said Elizabeth Swain, head of the Community Health Care Association of New York State, which represents primary care health centers. "But in the long run everybody knows this has to happen."

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