Tight Budgets Squeeze County Doctors

This is one of the leanest budgetary years in recent memory. But some counties seem able to weather the budgetary storm, while others, like San Francisco County, have been completely blown off course. What explains this difference?

Most state cuts will impact each county equally. The Governor’s current budget contains a 10% cut in Medi-Cal reimbursement rates. The budget will also lower the salary ceiling for Medi-Cal families and increase paper-work requirements, a move expected to boost more than a half million people from the program. These state-level changes, slated to go into effect July 1, will cut revenue and increase costs for all county facilities. Foreclosures and declining property values, however, have impacted county budgets differently. As homes are reassessed, Alameda County expects to lose $20 million in taxes this year. Santa Clara County expects a $60 to $70 million dollar loss. Lower revenue means less money for health care.

San Francisco’s Laguna Honda Hospital has suffered unit closures. Tight budget decisions made by the county and the facility have forced the closure of the hospital’s daycare and dementia care unit. "It’s been a hard decision," says hospital administrator Gary Pollock. "But I think it’s for the best in the long-run."

Politics plays a role, too. In San Francisco voters have approved many "set aside" programs for which they may be valuable but which carve out a growing portion of the budget, leaving less money for programs like Public Health. 

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Legislators Consider Safety Retirement for LA County Doctors

A ssembly Member Mervyn Dymally (D-Los Angeles) has introduced AB 1917, sponsored by UAPD, a bill to reclassify doctors in the LA County Jail and LA County Mental Health Facility as "safety members," who earn enhanced retirement benefits. Safety members can retire at an earlier age with a higher percentage of income. These would become the first county doctors to be classified as safety members, as some state doctors already are. UAPD intends to sponsor bills covering other counties if the bill for Los Angeles County passes through the Legislature. "We hope to start with a large county like LA to gain a toe hold that we can use to pull other counties along," explains Executive Director Al Groh. Visit the Legislative Advocacy page of www.uapd.com to track the progress of AB 1917.

UAPD Sponsors Assembly Bill 1917

Legislators Consider Safety Retirement for LA County Doctors
Budgetary Troubles
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Of all the UAPD-represented counties, it is San Francisco that has the largest deficit ($338 million) and the most dra- matic health service cuts. UAPD was among a coalition of unions that tried to stave off the crisis back in February by agreeing to a one-year contract extension (saving the county money in the short-run) in exchange for pension improve- ments down the road, an agreement that still requires voter approval as a ballot measure in June. But months later the County was still threatening to lay off hundreds of workers to balance the budget. The UAPD Bargaining Team negotiated another agreement, this time accepting unpaid “micro-furloughs” to avoid layoffs. The city has also accelerated its plans to shut portions of Laguna Honda as the hospital prepares to move to its new facility, emptying 110 bed Claredon Hall one year ahead of schedule in order to cut costs.

While not as dramatically as in San Francisco, the cuts are being felt elsewhere. Santa Barbara and Santa Clara Counties both face $8 million cuts to their Mental Health Departments next year, and Santa Bar- bara doctors are considering accepting furloughs. In Santa Cruz, no layoffs are expected but doctors are being pressured to raise revenue by increasing the number of patients seen, meaning less time with each.

Some counties seem to be holding their own. In Santa Bar- bara, doctors are invited to give budget suggestions at monthly meetings and via the internet. Solano implemented a hiring freeze last year in anticipation of this year’s problems, and ac- tually ends the year with a 39 million dollar surplus.

The budget fight reaches its peak this month. Doctors in one other county continue to fight for the agree- ment they deserve. County of Alameda doctors settled a four-year contract in late January, while the newly organized Los Angeles County doctors ratified an eight-month agreement at the end of February. Solano County TA’d an agreement on May 28, 2008. Negotia- tions continue in San Joaquin County. The Los Angeles County agree- ment came just five months after coun- ty-employed doctors certified UAPD as their exclusive bargaining agent. The eighteen-month pact includes a con- tinuation of the highly desirable Mega- Flex pension benefit for current employ- ees and a new pay scale that increases doctors’ wages between 12% and 25%, depending on specialty and senior- ity. Just as important as the significant economic gains, the contract protects doctors by offering binding third-party arbitration and a new pay scale that increases doctors’ wages between 12% and 25%, depending on specialty and senior- ity. As of this writing, one important issue remains open. About one-third of the 700 LA County doctors are also employed by UCLA or USC, which re- main in negotiations with the County over proposed changes to the way the doctors are paid. A portion of these doctors’ salaries now comes in the form of stipends funded by the County but distributed by the Universities; the County has proposed paying these doc- tors a fixed salary and eliminating the stipends entirely. If the County and the Universities have not yet reached an agreement by May 31st, the new con- tract allows the Union to reopen bar- gaining over the salaries of this group of doctors. Doctors who work for either University should check www.uapd.com for updates on this issue.

In Alameda County doctors won a contract that locks in a 15% increase for all doctors over the course of the agree- ment, in addition to a number of other economic gains. The reimbursement for CME increased from $1000 to $1500 a year, and the monies can now be used for online education courses. The maxi- mum dental benefit was raised to $1450 per year. Members voted overwhelm- ingly in favor of the contract.

The Bargaining Team in Solano County TA’d an agreement on May 28, 2008. The three-year agreement began with a 3% COLA and 1% signing bonus over the first year, followed by a COLA of between 3% and 5% in years two and three. The County and Union have agreed to a wage reopener later in 2008, after the results of a county-wide salary study are made public. UAPD will con- tinue to press for equity increases to bring doctors up to salary standards. The doctors will see benefit improvements, with more choices and better coverage, under a new Cafeteria Plan. The UAPD Bargaining Team recommends ratifica- tion of the agreement. Doctors in San Joaquin Coun- ty continue their year-long battle to achieve parity with other county work- ers in retirement benefits, as well as win the compensation package needed to attract doctors. The doctors are the only San Joaquin County employees not included in the county defined benefit pension plan. In 2007 the County Pen- sion Board agreed to add the doctors to the plan, but the County Board of Su- pervisors sued the Pension Board and UAPD to prevent the change from tak- ing place. While litigation on the pen- sion issue continues, the San Joaquin doctors still hope to resolve the issue at the bargaining table.

From day one of this well-organized group of doctors sent a clear and uni- fied message that they would ratify no contract that did not include the county pension plan. Eventually the County reconsidered its initial refusal and of- fered to add the doctors to the County pension plan, but at a later date. The county’s offer definitely showed progress, the doctors believe that they have waited long enough for good re- tirement benefits and continue to push for immediate enrollment in the plan. Both sides also continue to negotiate over market driven compensation pack- ages. The latest set of union proposals is under review by the County; should the County again reject the Union’s proposals, it is likely the negotiations will reach impasse for a second time. Doctors at the Alameda County Medical Center will enter negotia- tions over performance pay on June 11, 2008. The ACMC Bargaining Team is in place.

LA Ratifies Historic Contract; San Joaquin Fights On

UAPD Bargains in Four Counties

UAPD-represented physicians and dentists in three coun- ties ratified contracts in recent months, while doctors in one other county continue to fight for the agree- ment they deserve. County of Alameda doctors settled a four-year contract in late January, while the newly organized Los Angeles County doctors ratified an eight-month agreement at the end of February. Solano County TA’d an agreement on May 28, 2008. Negotia- tions continue in San Joaquin County. The Los Angeles County agree- ment came just five months after coun- ty-employed doctors certified UAPD as their exclusive bargaining agent. The eighteen-month pact includes a con- tinuation of the highly desirable Mega- Flex pension benefit for current employ- ees and a new pay scale that increases doctors’ wages between 12% and 25%, depending on specialty and senior- ity. Just as important as the significant economic gains, the contract protects doctors by offering binding third-party arbitration and a new pay scale that increases doctors’ wages between 12% and 25%, depending on specialty and senior- ity. As of this writing, one important issue remains open. About one-third of the 700 LA County doctors are also employed by UCLA or USC, which re- main in negotiations with the County over proposed changes to the way the doctors are paid. A portion of these doctors’ salaries now comes in the form of stipends funded by the County but distributed by the Universities; the County has proposed paying these doc- tors a fixed salary and eliminating the stipends entirely. If the County and the Universities have not yet reached an agreement by May 31st, the new con- contract allows the Union to reopen bar- gaining over the salaries of this group of doctors. Doctors who work for either University should check www.uapd.com for updates on this issue.

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