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Author: LYNN HORSLEY
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In more than 18 years with Swope Health Services, David Dembinski has seen good times and bad.

"This is one of the harder times," the physician said Friday as he talked about his busy practice of low-income patients who cope with such chronic diseases as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and emphysema.

Times may get even harder for Swope Health Services, Truman Medical Center, Children's Mercy Hospital and other Kansas City facilities that serve the poor. The city's 2004-05 budget proposal, unveiled Thursday, calls for them to take an \$8.5 million hit, unless voters approve a health-care property tax increase in August.

"We predominantly serve an indigent population," said Dembinski, chairman of Swope's adult medicine department. "We see patients who have limited options."

Dembinski works hard to help his patients manage their conditions. But he worries that budget cuts will reduce staffing and the number of patients served. He fears those patients may defer treatment until it becomes a crisis.

Lamont Weide, chief of endocrinology at Truman Medical Center, said the city could end up paying more in the long run.

"Some of these patients will end up being hospitalized all across the city, because they won't get their routine care and they'll end up going to emergency rooms," Weide said. "If we restrict their care, they will be sicker. And more hospitalizations will result, which will actually drive up the cost of care."

City Manager Wayne Cauthen said Friday he that was running a city in which costs are far outpacing revenues, and he had to make difficult decisions.

The budget, which the council has yet to approve, goes into effect May 1.

"I'm looking at priorities, the basic functions that cities need to provide," Cauthen said. "Normally, health care is a federal and a county function. If you look at what we provide, dollars for health care, it is probably in the higher tier of cities."

The cuts would include Truman Medical Center, \$6.8 million; Children's Mercy Hospital, \$1 million; health clinics (including Swope Health Services, the Free Health Clinic and Samuel Rogers Center), more than \$535,000.

Cauthen said the \$8.5 million could be restored to the health-care providers if voters approved a 13-cent increase to the health levy. Such an increase would cost the owner of a \$150,000 home about \$50 per year.

Although she supports a vote on increasing the health levy, Mayor Kay Barnes suggested alternatives, such as finding the \$8.5 million elsewhere. But that might involve unpopular alternatives, such as no-pay furlough days for city employees and making employees pay more of their health-care costs.

Some council members said Friday that they might seek cuts elsewhere in the budget. Councilman Troy Nash said he already had heard from safety net providers about the devastating impact the cuts could have.

"They're upset, and they're organizing and mobilizing," he said.

Swope Health Services spokeswoman Janet Burton said Friday that if the proposed cuts go through, Swope's budget would drop from \$638,394 last year to \$396,359 in the next fiscal year.

A cut of \$242,000 could mean that about 2,400 poor patients would no longer be able to receive primary care services, Burton said.

"We have seen demand for our services increase in the past year as patient encounters increased 12 percent," she said. "In other words, we see a need for more funding, instead of less funding."

Children's Mercy officials said that even if the hospital's budget were cut, they would never turn a child away, regardless of ability to pay. Truman Medical Center President John Bluford said he was still reviewing the manager's proposal and looked forward to discussing options with the council.

"I can tell you that we cannot absorb a \$6 million to \$7 million cut without a consequence to service delivery and access," Bluford said. "The immediate thing is a higher probability of increased diversions from our emergency room to other hospitals."

Dennis McCulloch, a spokesman for the University of Kansas Hospital, said officials there also were concerned about cuts affecting emergency room capabilities at Truman.

"If Truman has to cut back on the number of emergency cases," he said, "it could have a domino effect throughout hospitals in the metropolitan area."

The Star's Julius Karash contributed to this report.

To reach Lynn Horsley, City Hall reporter, call

(816) 234-4317 or send e-mail

to lhorsley@kcstar.com. First glance First glance

Health-care providers for the indigent say Kansas City's proposed cuts in funding could hurt the poor.

Other hospitals fear that their emergency rooms could be flooded with people seeking care.

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