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Cambridge Health Alliance announces service cuts, holds dialogue with community

By Meghan Frederico

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Somerville Hospital will see some services close, but not the most important ones.

~Photo by Bobbie Toner

Representatives from the Cambridge Health Alliance gathered on Tuesday night to outline its proposed service cutbacks for community members and listen to their concerns.

The meeting came on the heels of an announcement that, due to cuts in state funding, CHA will eliminate 300 jobs across the network and will consolidate and eliminate some services. Major changes in Somerville include the elimination of the Addictions and Detox Unit and inpatient services at Somerville Hospital.

Other changes include the closure of six primary care centers, including two in Somerville. The dental practice in Somerville will close and merge with their Cambridge site, the number of beds in psychiatric units across the system will be halved, and adolescent inpatient services will be eliminated at Cambridge Hospital.

The mood at the community meeting was somber as the panelists laid out the budgetary context that lead to the proposed cutbacks.

"We're facing dramatic cuts related to the loss of revenue from the Commonwealth," said the alliance's chief executive officer Dennis Keefe, explaining that 15% of its budget being cut halfway into 2009, and 25% beginning in July 2009. CHA is especially sensitive to fluctuations in state funding, since these funds account for 67% of its budget, he said.

These levels of reductions, however, are a significant improvement over the state's initial proposal, Keefe said. Had Somerville's Congressional delegation had not stepped in to negotiate with the administration, CHA would be facing bankruptcy. The higher level of state funding, however, is contingent on CHA consolidating.

Mayor Curtatone urged the attendees to keep the proposal in perspective, saying that "the changes to services at Somerville are intended to make sure it survives in the long run." When attendees suggested that they hadn't tried hard enough to fight the budget cuts, the Mayor countered strongly, saying that if the Somerville delegation hadn't worked together to counter the initial budget, Somerville Hospital would be closing.

"Even a victory is a loss for the community," State Senator Anthony Galluccio said of the delegation's success in securing higher levels of funding than originally proposed.

Many of the community members who contributed to the discussion were skeptical that CHA would remain able to serve all its members if the proposed changes pass. Some argued for the necessity of eliminated programs, and many expressed disappointment over the losses sustained by CHA.

Several community members responded strongly to the closing of the Addictions and Detox Unit. One of the unit's staff members said that many of their patients are homeless, and that if they lose this safe space they will have nowhere to go, and will start using again. Panelists admitted that they did not have any definitive solutions, but said that they will be working closely with community providers and the Department of Public Health (DPH) to figure out how to meet the needs of those who are losing the service.

A staff member from the dental services unit addressed the panel, asking how they would be able to serve the same number of patients with the proposed system-wide reduction from 12 to 5 dentist chairs. Chief Operating Officer Allison Bayer responded by saying "we can do more with less," and that implementing administrative lessons learned will help them increase their operational efficiency.

Another CHA staff member asked the panel how the issue of how parking would be handled at merged sites that will absorb new patients, saying that the parking situation is already bad enough at some locations to cause patients to switch providers. Panelists responded that they are looking into shuttle services to alleviate this issue.

A staff member from the pediatric inpatient unit, which would close under the current proposal, asked the panel about their basis for this decision. CEO Dennis Keefe responded by saying that it was a utilization issue, and that in the past year, 43% of the time the unit had one or zero patients.

One attendee explicitly called for single-payer healthcare, and this comment garnered the loudest applause of the night.

Panelists concluded by acknowledging limitations presented by both budget and current state policies, but maintained that this proposal would provide the best possible outcome. "If this fails, we have no backup" cautioned State Representative Denise Provost.

CHA board members will vote on the proposal on February 10.

Follow up on Cambridge Health Alliance cuts at Somerville Hospital

By Vladimir Lewis

In an effort to correct a few items in last week's story that were misreported, Doug Bailey was interviewed to set the record straight.

The reported cut of 300 employees will be spread throughout the entire CHA network and not all at Somerville Hospital. These cuts are combinations of layoffs, resignations, hourly changes, retirement and regular attrition, according to Doug Bailey, CHA Chief Communications Officer.

Clinics will not be cut at Somerville Hospital. Bailey said, "Clinic and administrative services will be expanded under the proposed plan, preserving the hospital as a vital and thriving institution."

The reduction in psychiatric beds is almost entirely at Cambridge Hospital, not Whidden as previously reported, and the SH Adolescent Psych unit will be transferred to Cambridge Hospital.

After the changes, CHA will still have 95 mental health beds, one of the largest facilities of its kind in the state.

Bailey continued, "We believe we can continue to meet the needs of core communities with this level of attention and focus on mental health services."

There is no existing pediatric unit at SH and thus there will be no cuts in this type of service there.

Bailey praised the work of Mayor Curtatone and his office, referring to the many hours of hard work put in between CHA and the mayor's office in helping make these tough decisions.

"It's really difficult to convey how much painstaking research goes into these decisions. We're keeping the Somerville ER open and the Cambridge Hospital is less than a mile away."