

# Barton CEO paints bleak picture for health care

By John Williams

How is America's health care reform going to affect the health care marketplace? That's the big question being asked by hundreds of health care providers across the nation just like Barton Health.

According to the California Hospital Association, there are 54 million Americans – including 7 million Californians – who are without health care insurance. As a nonprofit health care provider, Barton Memorial Hospital is dedicated to treating everyone who comes in the door, regardless of their ability to pay. Our goal is to provide high-quality care for everyone by offering affordable, medically necessary care consistently in all of our facilities.



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However, with the uninsured population steadily on the rise, coupled with Medicaid policy changes, cutbacks in public and other subsidies, and a downturn in the number of fulltime residents and visiting tourists, health care for Lake Tahoe has been on rocky ground for the past year.

This unfortunate trend is expected to continue through 2011. Failure to support the local providers could cause our health system to dwindle in services offered, significantly impacting

uninsured people and our entire community.

Take a moment to imagine South Lake Tahoe without services like an emergency department to treat unexpected, life-threatening conditions or a family birthing center to attend to delivering moms and their newborns.

Picture our community without the Barton Community Clinic, which sees thousands of uninsured and underinsured patients each year.

Would employers be able to recruit qualified candidates for positions if a solid health care foundation were not in town?

Discounted health programs like wellness lab draws, discounted EKGs, free health screening and H1N1 vaccination clinics would no longer be available. Patients would be required to travel significant distances for all their health care needs. Barton would not be here to provide financial assistance to help pay for medical care for those who cannot afford medical coverage.

When painted, the health care picture in South Lake Tahoe without a local community hospital is bleak. Unfortunately, the current reform is not going to strengthen the position of our health care providers. In fact, most hospitals may still see a larger financial hit with further deterioration in their balance sheets. Budget cuts to California's Medi-Cal program in 2009 have put patients and our hospitals at even greater risk.

Already in the works are further decreases in reimbursements for Medicare and more than likely Medi-Cal. The new Medi-Cal reimbursement cuts are further eroding an already under-funded program. Medi-Cal ranks last in the nation in payments to health care providers. California's community hospitals lost \$2.8 billion in 2007 from inadequate payments for care provided to Medi-Cal patients and that loss continues to climb.

Adding to the financial strain, the current federal budget calls for payment delays to doctors and hospitals. For some hospitals, such delays meant laying off health care workers, suspending services and perhaps closing altogether. Barton Health has been forced to look at cost containment including some cuts to employee benefits, layoffs and consolidation of services. These fiscal measures were necessary to ensure that Barton Health continues to function as a viable, competitive health care provider offering the highest level of quality care possible and employment for 925 community members.

Health care reform is needed to help broaden the reach of access to medical services for all Americans. At Barton, we are dedicated to working with the current reform bill for the benefit of our community and our hospital. We plan to consistently look at our services and streamline where there are opportunities, in an effort to survive the volatile climate of health care in our country and provide comprehensive services to our community. We will continue to seek grants and take advantage of rural health benefits, so that we can continue our dedication to enhancing performance and customer service, continue to recruit highly-trained physicians and purchase the latest technology.

*John Williams is chief executive officer for Barton Health. He is also on the board of directors of the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California.*