

Rural towns struggle as health clinics lock doors

By Jocelyn Wiener, Center for Health Reporting

DOYLE – Just before the turnoff into this tiny community, near the shuttered Burger Barn, a sign announcing Doyle’s existence also hints at its fade toward oblivion. Underneath the name of the local clinic, Doyle Family Practice, someone has added the words: “Temporarily closed.”

Last summer, state budget cuts forced the Doyle clinic – along with five other rural health or dental clinics in far Northern California – to close. Since then, the isolated stretch of highway connecting this high desert community in Lassen County to Susanville, 42 miles northwest, and Reno, 46 miles southeast, has become a major obstacle for people in need of health care.

Many of Doyle’s residents are elderly or poor, often unable to find a ride to either city and too broke to afford gas to drive themselves.

“We all depend on that clinic and it’s a very big hardship not to have it,” said Alice Sarmiento, 61, a retired tow truck driver who suffers from a heart condition, asthma and chronic pain.

Sarmiento said she cancels appointments on days she doesn’t have gas money to get to Reno. If there’s an emergency, she’ll either need to find a ride or wait 45 minutes for an ambulance.

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