

Fixing ailing hospitals Medicaid task force eyed for operating aid

BY NICHOLAS HIRSHON DAILY NEWS WRITER

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New York Hospital Queens One of two new patient units in the new West Wing at New York Hospital Queens in Flushing.

Queens health care advocates are counting on an upcoming state report to alleviate health care woes stemming from hospital closings and a financial crisis.

But it's unclear how the borough's 10 hospitals will be affected by the report from the state's **Medicaid** redesign task force, which must submit findings by March 1 to Gov. Cuomo on how to save cash in the next budget.

Locals hope the report - likely to have many implications for state hospitals - will be positive for Queens. They say aid can't come fast enough.

"If we have an outbreak of something or we have a major attack or a major crash at the airport - you name it - we are not prepared for a real emergency at all," warned **New York Hospital Queens** President Stephen Mills.

Created in January by an executive order, the 27-member task force of lawmakers and experts is reviewing Medicaid, which serves the poor and disabled.

Amid recent budget deficits, the state has cut Medicaid reimbursements to hospitals, hurting their bottom line at a time when Queens centers are crammed.

The state Health Department denied hearing any reports of overcrowded hospitals in Queens. But local facilities have cited upticks since the shutdowns of Parkway in 2008 and St. John's and Mary Immaculate in 2009.

Near Parkway, North Shore-LIJ's **Forest Hills Hospital** has witnessed a 42% spike in emergency room visits from 2008 to 2010, officials said. The number of patients admitted also jumped 22%.

And New York Hospital Queens in **Flushing** saw a nearly 18% surge in emergency room "encounters," including both visits and admissions.

So far, stakeholders say, attempts to solve the dilemma have been creative but inadequate.

A group of community activists known as Southeast Queens United in Support of Healthcare, or SQUISH, wants to draw attention to the issue by organizing a seven-day temporary clinic with volunteer doctors near **Jamaica**.

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"We didn't want to just sit idly and not let people have access," said SQUISH community organizer [Alyssa Aguilera](#).

But it's not perfect. Aguilera said the clinic probably won't arrive until summer 2012, and it's only a short-term solution.

Mills has proposed Queens hospitals unite to fund a set of 16-hour-a-day walk-in clinics in the borough. But there's a setback there, too. He estimated each clinic would cost the cash-strapped hospitals about \$10 million.

There are rumblings about re-opening Parkway, but that plan - being pushed by the same players whose alleged mismanagement forced the hospital to close - faces considerable skepticism from state and elected officials.

"It's a grim situation," said [Dan Andrews](#), a spokesman for [Borough President Helen Marshall](#). "We're really not seeing a big improvement on the horizon."

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