

Holy Cross wants more help for poor pregnant women

■ The county's other hospitals are stepping up, but too slowly to ease Silver Spring hospital's burden, CEO Sexton says

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Holy Cross Hospital in Silver Spring will be overwhelmed with low-income and uninsured pregnant women if the county's other hospitals do not set up pre-natal programs to help more quickly, the hospital's top administrator said.

"I'm frustrated," said Holy Cross CEO Kevin J. Sexton. "I've been clear on that from the executive branch to the County Council. We've been a team player on this and then some. But we've needed the county on this to make it work. It's been nine months.

"We put the first [pre-natal] program together literally almost overnight. I'm not suggesting it's easy, but it's definitely doable."

Last year, Holy Cross officials told Montgomery County that it could no longer be the only hospital offering the pre-natal services under the county's Maternity Partnership Program.

Holy Cross officials set a deadline of July 1 for seeing women from outside the Silver Spring area.

The county Department of Health and Human Services has worked with other hospitals to help them set up similar programs, said Ulder J. Tillman, the county's health officer.

Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park expects to begin its pre-natal program on July 17 while Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville could begin in July or August, Tillman said. Montgomery General in Olney has met with obstetricians about setting up a program there.

"I understand [Sexton's] frustration, but they're moving at deliberate speed," Tillman said.

For six years, Holy Cross has been the sole provider under the Maternity Partnership Program.

About 800 women were examined and treated in 2000, the program's first year. The county paid \$585 while the woman paid \$125 out of pocket. That covered roughly a third to less than half of the actual cost of the service, Sexton said. The hospital absorbed the rest as part of its charitable works.

Over the years, however, the number of women in the program has risen higher than expected. Last year, the hospital saw about 1,600

women in the pre-natal program. With Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) cutting thousands of immigrants statewide from a medical assistance program last fall, the number was expected to shoot up to 2,200 by Friday, the end of the fiscal year.

"We all thought when this first started it would go to 1,200 and not go much further," Sexton said.

In October, Sexton told the County Council that Holy Cross would have to limit the number of women it treats to 1,500 because it cannot afford the cost or the strain on the hospital's services.

"We have to put a limit on this," Sexton said. "We can't just let this stay open-ended."

Under the county health department's plan, Washington Adventist would treat 500 women, Shady Grove Adventist would see 200 women, and Montgomery General would cover 100 women annually, Tillman said. Suburban Hospital in Bethesda does not have a maternity ward.

Holy Cross saw the new arrangement as providing the relief it sought.

"But we've been operating under the assumption they would step up by July 1," Sexton said. "We're still waiting for a definitive agreement to keep the volume moving and to keep Holy Cross from being completely inundated ...

"One way or another they've got to step up and start because we won't have enough capacity in July if the other three hospitals don't pick up somewhere," he said.

To make the pre-natal program more attractive to the other hospitals, the county is increasing the reimbursement from \$585 to \$895 while the patients would pay up to \$250 out of pocket, Tillman said.

The county will pay \$2.76 million, covering 1,875 women, in the fiscal year that begins July 1, Tillman said. That is a shortfall of 495 women below the projected number, which means the health department probably will return to the County Council for \$600,000 needed to cover the balance, she said.

Washington Adventist is on track to begin services on July 17, but no date had been set for Shady Grove's program to begin.

Shady Grove lacks the space to run the pre-natal clinic at the hospi-

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tal, but would take over the space now used by Holy Cross on Picard Drive in Rockville, Tillman said, adding that the lease has been sent to Shady Grove's lawyers for review.

But council members expressed their own frustration with the missed deadline.

"With all due respect to this whole issue, we started talking to Adventist about this a year ago," said

Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring. "For the life of me, I can't understand why it has taken this long, but it has."

The other hospitals do not have doctor residency programs like Holy Cross so they have to make their own arrangements with doctors and nurses to be part of the program, Tillman replied.

Silverman told Tillman he would like a weekly update on the other hospitals.

"I don't believe their feet has been held to the fire," he said.