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Chamber backs health care proposal

By Kristina Peterson / Daily News Staff Writer

Small business owners in Palo Alto may have another option for providing health care to their employees later this year.

Thursday morning, the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce's Government Action Council unanimously endorsed the Healthy Workers program, which is designed to get affordable health care to uninsured residents of Santa Clara County.

"Finding health benefits for a small business is the biggest challenge," Chamber CEO Sandra Lonnquist said. "Health providers don't even want to touch you with a 10-foot pole."

By some county estimates, as many as 25,000 people could benefit from the new plan, Lonnquist said.

Developed by a coalition of groups led by Working Partnerships, the Healthy Workers plan would enable businesses with between two and 50 employees who live in Santa Clara County to sign up for discounted, county-run health care, Associate Policy Director Sarah Muller outlined in a letter to Lonnquist.

Administered by the Santa Clara Family Health Plan, the program would allow employees making roughly \$16 per hour or less to get care through the Valley Medical Center and other county community clinics and health providers. Employers would pay a monthly premium of \$130 per employee, while employees would contribute between \$25 and \$55 per month, Muller said in the letter. The Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital system would charge discounted rates for the program's enrollees, she said.

"It's almost like a co-op partnership," Lonnquist said. "It really is a team effort to provide coverage."

Santa Clara County Supervisor Liz Kniss, who helped develop the plan, said Healthy Workers would enable the county to start to recoup some of its health care costs, while allotting both employers and workers a share of responsibility in the system.

"It's our own hybrid for providing medical care," Kniss said. "It gives the employer and

the employee a measure of respect and assurance."

The county Board of Supervisors approved the plan in June.

In Palo Alto, small business owners already struggling to keep expenses down often find the costs of health care prohibitive, said Marta Reines, owner of the Butterfly Life fitness center in Midtown.

"It's almost impossible," she said. As a result, employees often leave for jobs with more stable benefits. Being able to provide health care could help reduce turnover, she said.

"It might help to make small businesses competitive," Reines said.

And small businesses make up a significant chunk of Palo Alto's economy.

Sherry Bijan, president of the downtown business improvement district, estimated there are roughly 700 small businesses in the downtown area alone. And Lonquist said they represent approximately 80 percent of the Chamber's members.

The effects of implementing the health care plan would be "huge," she said.

Muller is still completing state licensing, so the program is slated to start in June, Lonquist said.

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