

# Tulare Co. to lay off 200 health agency workers

Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2009

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday voted to lay off about 200 Health and Human Services Agency employees and to close clinics in Tulare and Lindsay because of declining state funding.

"This is a tough decision," said Phil Cox, board chairman. "We are impacting lives."

However, Cox and other supervisors said they had no other choice when faced with the state cut in health services funds.

State lawmakers eliminated a minimum funding level for health services, which comes primarily from sales tax revenues and vehicle license fees, forcing the layoffs and clinic closures, county officials said.

Supervisors emphasized that closure of the clinics as county-run operations does not mean that services in the facilities will cease. On Tuesday, the board also approved an agreement with the Tulare District Hospital to take over the two clinics, which combined serve more than 16,000 patients annually.

The county is scheduled to close the clinics Feb. 28; the Tulare hospital would take over March 1. The clinics -- the Tulare Hillman Health Care Center and Lindsay Health Care Center -- provide health and mental-health services.

The board supported the layoffs and clinic closures, despite requests during a public hearing Tuesday to delay the action and consider other options or use other money to avoid the cuts.

"This is happening at a time when Tulare County has millions of dollars in other [funds]," said Albert Carlson, a spokesman with the Service Employees International Union Local 521, which represents most of the employees facing layoffs.

Some speakers said the county could divert money from other programs to stave off layoffs and continue operating the clinics.

Supervisors said they empathized with those who will lose their jobs, but said clinic services will continue, and they believe many of the laid-off employees may be hired by the Tulare hospital to work at the two clinics.

"I think this is a move we have to make and I think time is of the essence," Supervisor Steve Worthley said, referring to the uncertainty of state funding.

The board supported the layoffs -- which will include case workers, eligibility workers and managers -- and clinic closures on 4-0 votes. Supervisor Allen Ishida, who left Tuesday's meeting earlier to travel to Washington, D.C., was absent for the votes.

About 300 Health and Human Services Agency employees received conditional layoff notices last month, 225 of whom were expected to lose their jobs. That number could be fewer than 200, county officials said Tuesday.

The Health and Human Services Agency employs about 2,300 people.

Some of the workers will be laid off by the end of the month. Other layoffs will come within the next two months, though specifically which employees will be laid off still is being determined.