



Inland News

Sickbed shortage in southwestern Riverside County

Area's ill, injured resigned to long drives, longer waits



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The Press-Enterprise

Video: [High hopes at Menifee Valley Medical Center](#)

Video: [Improvements at Inland Valley and Rancho Springs Medical Centers in Murrieta](#)

More than 80,000 people have moved to southwestern Riverside County in the past nine years, but no hospital beds have been added and the region's bed-per-resident ratio is now nearly one-fourth the national average, statistics show.

Even with the current or planned expansions at the area's three hospitals and the planned construction of hospitals in Temecula and Murrieta, the ratio would remain below the national average, according to statistics from local hospital officials and a national hospital association.

Health care experts and officials in the hospital industry said southwestern Riverside County, the Inland area and much of California are underserved because it's financially difficult to expand and construct hospitals in those areas. They cite strict state building standards, low government reimbursement rates and high numbers of uninsured patients as factors.

Southwestern Riverside County hospital officials list difficulty in securing money for hospital expansions, a shortage of medical personnel and the lengthy time frame involved in getting state approval for construction as other problems.

They point out that they have added services and equipment and made emergency rooms more efficient.

State and Inland health officials said no group is responsible for ensuring that the number of hospital beds in a region keeps pace with its population.

Story continues below



Amanda Lucidon / The Press-Enterprise
Thomas Dougherty, administrator at Menifee Valley Medical Center, had hoped for \$10 million in bond money to finish the fourth floor of the hospital, but that hope was dashed when hospital district voters rejected a bond measure last year.

Meanwhile, Southwestern Riverside County residents endure lengthy drives to reach a hospital and waits as long as eight hours in the emergency room before getting a hospital bed. They wonder how much longer the waits will be as southwestern Riverside County continues to grow.

More than 85,000 people are expected to move to the region by 2011, according to statistics from Southwest Healthcare System, which runs Rancho Springs Medical Center in Murrieta and Inland Valley Medical Center in Wildomar.

Karen Schneider, an 18-year resident of Temecula Valley Wine Country, has been caring for her parents, who are 82 and 85, for the past several years. She has visited the emergency rooms at Rancho Springs and Inland Valley a total of six times.

She said her parents waited in the emergency room on average six to eight hours before getting a hospital bed. Southwest Healthcare System officials said those waits were several hours longer than average.

Without enough hospital beds, Schneider said, the emergency room becomes a bottleneck.

A home-building moratorium should be considered in southwestern Riverside County, she said, until bed numbers have caught up with the population.

"I joke around with friends that we should put a great big sign on the freeway that says: 'This is a great place to live, but don't get sick,' " she said.

Bed Numbers

It's people such as Schneider who the Temecula City Council had in mind Tuesday, when it approved moving forward with a southwestern Riverside County medical-facility study that would assess health care needs, including hospital beds.

The council appointed Mayor Pro Tem Mike Naggart to serve on a regional task force. He said he wants to examine the issue because he has noticed common threads in residents' descriptions of their hospital experiences, including having trouble getting a hospital bed or sitting in the

The shortage of hospital beds has grown worse over the past two decades. During that period, southwestern Riverside County has been transformed from farms to housing developments as people, many from San Diego and Orange counties, have been attracted to the Inland area by the prospect of more-affordable homes.

Roads have been built and new schools have opened to accommodate the population growth. Cities have hired more police officers and firefighters.

But no hospitals have been built since the late 1980s. A nursing home in Murrieta was converted to use as a hospital in the 1990s, however.

Southwestern Riverside County currently is served by three hospitals: 84-bed Menifee Valley Medical Center in Sun City, 80-bed Inland Valley and 96-bed Rancho Springs.

Menifee Valley is part of the Valley Health System, a Hemet-based public hospital district that also operates Hemet Valley Medical Center and Moreno Valley Community Hospital. Inland Valley and Rancho Springs are part of Southwest Healthcare System, a subsidiary of Pennsylvania-based Universal Health Services Inc.

The three hospitals provide 0.7 bed per 1,000 southwestern Riverside County residents, according to bed numbers from hospital officials and 2006 population figures from Southwest Healthcare System. That figure does not include beds in emergency or labor rooms.

Population figures used to compile the hospital-bed statistic take in the cities of Temecula, Murrieta, Lake Elsinore and Canyon Lake and unincorporated communities, including Romoland, Menifee, Sun City, Wildomar, De Luz and Aguanga.

State and national figures are 1.9 beds and 2.7 beds, respectively, per 1,000 people, according to 2005 data -- the most current available -- compiled by the American Hospital Association and posted at www.statehealthfacts.org.

Story continues below



Ed Crisostomo / The Press-Enterprise
Construction workers continue their labors on Rancho Springs Medical Center's expansion. The project is expected to more than double the size of the Murrieta hospital.

In the coming year, the number of hospital beds in southwestern Riverside County will increase.

Southwest plans to build a 356-bed hospital in Temecula, and a group made up of physicians and community members wants to build an 80- to 100-bed physician-owned hospital in Murrieta.

Those projects combined with ongoing expansion at Inland Valley and Rancho Springs and planned expansion at Menifee Valley would add 682 beds.

If all those hospital beds are in place by 2011 -- which the experts say is unlikely -- there would be 2.1 beds per 1,000 southwestern Riverside County residents, based on a population estimate from Southwest Healthcare System.

A Long Process

Hospital construction plans in California are reviewed and approved by the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development.

It takes six to seven years from the time a group decides to build a hospital until it's completed, said John Gillengerten, the agency's deputy director.

The process is long because there is more complexity involved in erecting a hospital than in constructing other types of buildings, Gillengerten said. An office building is designed to survive an earthquake, but a hospital is designed not only to survive but also to be functional after an earthquake, he said.

Earthquake requirements are just one thing that strains hospitals owners' finances, making it difficult to raise the money needed to expand or construct hospitals in California, said Jim Lott, executive vice president of the Hospital Association of Southern California, which represents more than 170 hospitals.

The state also has the nation's highest number of uninsured emergency-room patients and the lowest reimbursement rate for government-insured patients, Lott said. Reimbursement rates in New York are twice as much, he said.

Lott refers to these two financial factors and the earthquake requirements as "the unholy trinity."

"It's a struggle in California," he said. "It's a struggle to keep up with the needs."

Menifee Valley

Thomas Dougherty, administrator at Menifee Valley Medical Center, understands that struggle.

The hospital opened in 1989 with 84 beds. Eighteen years and 150,000 new southwestern Riverside County residents later, it still has 84 beds.

Other than a failed \$485 million bond measure defeated by voters in September, Dougherty knows of no efforts to significantly expand the hospital since it opened.

The population of the hospital's service area dictates when the hospital will expand, he said. Only within the past few years has that population surged.

Dougherty said new services and equipment have been added, including \$250,000 worth of telemetry equipment for heart patients and an emergency-room addition.

The bond measure would have enabled the hospital to double its size, add 130 beds and build an

emergency room twice the size of the present one, Dougherty said. Even if voters had approved the measure, the expansion would have taken seven to nine years to complete, he said.

Dougherty would like to see another bond measure go to voters, but Patrick Searl, vice chairman of the Valley Health System board, said no decision has been made.

Judy Gifford, 66, of Sun City, supported the September bond measure. She estimates that she has been to the hospital a dozen times as a patient or visitor since moving to Sun City in 1999. The hospital should at least be doubled in size, she said.

"I see all these homes going up," Gifford said. "I don't know where they're going to go. It's bad now. It's going to get worse."

Southwest Healthcare

Inland Valley Medical Center and what is now Rancho Springs Medical Center both opened in 1987.

Between 1992 and 1998, Rancho Springs was converted from a nursing home to a 96-bed hospital. Inland Valley hasn't added a bed since opening.

Hospital officials point out that they have started offering new services, such as neurosurgery and bariatric surgery for weight loss, and have added new CT scan and MRI machines.

In 2001, Southwest Healthcare System was created when Universal Health Services bought Rancho Springs.

That same year, hospital officials began planning the construction that is currently going on at Rancho Springs and Inland Valley, said Linda Bradley, CEO of Southwest Healthcare System.

In 2006, a patient would spend on average 5.15 hours in the Inland Valley emergency room before being admitted to a hospital bed or discharged, said Southwest spokeswoman Teresa Fleege. At Rancho Springs, the average wait was 4.6 hours, she said.

That year, on average, 85 percent to 90 percent of the beds at the two hospitals were filled, Fleege said.

Bradley acknowledged that local hospitals are "very busy now" and "a little behind the curve" in providing hospital beds and some services.

However, she said construction will more than double the size of Rancho Springs, and Inland Valley will increase by more than 50 percent. The number of emergency-room bays at the hospitals will more than double, and a total of 112 beds will be added.

Bradley declined to say when the work at Rancho Springs is expected to be finished. At Inland Valley, 44 beds are expected to open in mid-summer, Fleege said.

Bradley declined to say when she expects the Temecula hospital to open. The project received the Temecula City Council's approval in January 2006, but ground has not yet been broken.

Larry Blochl, 63, who moved to Temecula Valley Wine Country six years ago, thinks the Temecula hospital is long overdue.

"I think it should have been half-finished by now," Blochl said.

In January, he fell in his garage, suffering a compound fracture in his back, and needed an ambulance. He said the trip from his home to Rancho Springs Medical Center took 25 minutes. He thinks that travel time would have been cut in half with a hospital in Temecula.

"I welcome the hospital," Blochl said. "I'm anxious to have it here. It gives me a sense of security to have a hospital nearby."

Staff writer Leezel Tanglao and The Press-Enterprise staff contributed to this report.

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Hospital Bed shortfall

Hospital beds available for every 1,000 people:

United States	2.7
California	1.9
Southwestern Riverside County	0.7

Sources: www.statehealthfacts.org, Menifee Valley Medical Center, Southwest Healthcare System and Southern California Association of Governments
