

# Agencies fight fiscal flu

## Departments balance budget, public health

By ED SCOTT, STAFF WRITER

When Dr. Rachna Gulati was welcomed by North Port officials last year, the new Sarasota County Health Department pediatrician joked that the city's population had just grown by one; a "new baby" had been born.

But while North Port's growth — from 22,000 to 56,000 since 2000 — helped the health department to add staff and avoid layoffs in recent years, both it and the Charlotte County Health Department have lost positions to attrition, with open positions not being filled. Attrition has led in some cases to reduced patient and client services, or added burdens on existing employees, who already are making professional sacrifices to work for the state.

Many health department employees, from physicians to technicians who inspect septic tanks, have the same skills and certifications as people who do similar work in the private sector, but their salaries typically are lower. For example, full-time health department physicians, who earn around \$117,000, can make much more in private practice.

Charlotte County also has avoided layoffs. It began this fiscal year with one full-time and five part-time physicians, and two full-time and three part-time nurse practitioners. Then, department officials adjusted to the loss, through attrition, of two doctors in recent months, hoping to reduce the impact on patient care. "In this state, it's becoming much more challenging for the staff," said Steven Mitnick, Charlotte health department administrator. "This is the type of work that they choose to do and this is the population that they choose to serve. They accept certain sacrifices along the way. There are gains (regular hours) and there are losses (noncompetitive salaries)."

Complicating matters, Florida health department employees have not received pay raises from the state Legislature in six years, Mitnick said. "We can't compete (with the private sector)," he added. "When we are recruiting, it's becoming more and more difficult."

Now, after the Charlotte County Commission's recent decision to have the health department's environmental health division inspect residents' septic systems without requiring the owners to cover the full cost, Mitnick accounted for the \$500,000 hit in his department's \$6.35 million, 2010-11 budget by opting not to replace the two departed physicians and by reducing the hours of the third by one day per week. Coupled with the transfer of a nurse from adult health to the Hope Clinic at The Academy at Charlotte Technical Center — a Port Charlotte school for at-risk and nontraditional students — the department expects to reduce clinic appointments by more than 13,000 during the next fiscal year. About 5,000 patients, primarily adults, will be affected.

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In Sarasota County, health department officials began ramping up their efforts to serve the growing North Port community during the mid-2000s, including the current expansion of the North Port Health Center, where the staff will grow from two medical doctors and two nurse practitioners to an as-yet-undetermined mix of six health care professionals when the renovated facility opens in January of next year. But in 2007, officials watched the real estate boom end and adjusted their annual budgets accordingly, because less new home construction meant fewer health department employees were needed to handle their environmental-health mandate, including issuing water, well and septic permits.

Due to budget cuts, the Sarasota County Health Department now has 15 school nurses, two fewer than two years ago. Several years ago there were four positions in emergency preparedness (handling crises like hurricanes and H1N1, or swine flu). Now there are one and a half.

The Sarasota health department's budget for 2010-11 is not yet approved, but Bill Little, executive director of Sarasota County Health & Human Services, expects a reduction of \$500,000 to \$600,000. The budget has been \$31 million to \$32 million in recent years, with about \$3 million coming from the County Commission and the rest from other sources. According to Little, federal funding has remained constant or increased in recent years. Both state "categorical" funding — money for specific programs — and noncategorical state revenue have decreased.

Self-generated revenue has increased from 49 percent of the Sarasota department's budget to 58 percent over the past four years, due to increased efficiencies in client flow, revenue collections and increased client volume. Little touts several department successes that have occurred despite budget cuts.

The department's efforts to find efficiencies have been so successful that it is expected to receive more than \$1 million from the state over three years to hire three people and create a "clinic management institute," which will conduct programs to teach other county health departments across the state how to become more efficient.

Meanwhile, a regional Community Health Improvement Partnership was formed in the early 2000s to engage residents on local health care issues. CHIP and its Community Health Action Team offshoot have been primary forces in the drive to increase health-care services in North Port. But the CHIP program, which had four and a half positions several years ago, now is down to two employees. Little says with a larger staff, CHIP could replicate some of its North Port success stories in Sarasota's Newtown, which formed a CHAT in 2008.

"The resources just aren't there," he said.

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The situation is better in Charlotte and Sarasota counties than in some other areas of the state and the nation. Health departments across the country, many of which provide services to the poorest and most needy of citizens, have been flummoxed by the recession.

These state agencies, which rely on local, state and federal funds from a myriad of sources, lost 23,000 jobs to layoffs and attrition nationwide from January 2008 to December 2009.

According to a survey by the National Association of County and City Health Officials, 81 percent of the Florida departments surveyed experienced loss of staff (layoffs and attrition), compared to 46 percent nationally. Ten percent of Florida health departments reduced staff time (hours cut and furloughs) due to budget concerns, compared to 23 percent nationally.

Budgets are down in some regions. Nineteen percent of the Florida departments surveyed noted a decrease in their current year's budget, compared to 38 percent nationally. The number of respondents indicating a lower budget jumped to 60 percent when not including one-time funding that departments often receive, such as to combat the H1N1 flu virus.

Officials from only 20 of Florida's 67 local health departments responded to the survey.

Mitnick says health departments strive to provide many services, both those required by the state and the "noncategorical" services that an individual community needs.

"We're like General Electric," he said. "They make nuclear power plants and they also make light bulbs. We do everything" from clinic services to inspecting septic systems to issuing birth and death certificates. "We're involved in a lot of different areas and we have to tie all these different things together and make it work."

But in recent years, local health departments in Florida absorbed a \$10 million reduction in noncategorical revenue, money they might have spent on health concerns that directly affect their communities, such as teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and issues involving the elderly.

"What that does," Little said, "is take away — a little bit at a time — the flexibility to make some decisions about what to do."

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SUN PHOTOS BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH, [eallen@sun-herald.com](mailto:eallen@sun-herald.com)

Charlotte County Health Department Environmental Specialist Nancy Hendershot demonstrates how she collects water samples at the Port Charlotte Beach Complex this week.