Children's Hospital seeking a site for clinic to serve City Heights area
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Children's Hospital officials are looking to buy a building in City Heights to establish a day clinic and evening urgent-care facility with Mid-City Community Clinic in an effort to improve kids' access to health care.

"We see a lot of emergency room and urgent care visits from this community already, and we're trying to bring the service closer to where the need is," said Meg Norton, vice president of marketing and managed care for Children's Hospital & Health Center.

Children's has been counting the number of City Heights children with relatively minor ailments who come after hours to the emergency room and who could be treated less expensively in a clinic setting closer to home.

"It's a very high number," Norton said.

She and Roberta Feinberg, director of the Mid-City Community Clinic on Polk Avenue in City Heights, both emphasized that the plan is far from reality. But it has been approved by both boards with strong commitments. Children's board allocated about $200,000 to purchase the building.

Feinberg's clinic, established in 1974, expanded for the first time in 1995 from four examination rooms to 11, but it is rapidly needing more, she said.

One reason is that at least two primary care providers have left the area in the past two years. Another is the increase in children of low-income families, now estimated at 25,000 below the age of 9 and 14,000 between the ages of 10 and 17 in City Heights alone.

About 44 percent of the households there earn less than $25,000 a year, and a large percentage are uninsured.

"It's pretty astounding how medically underserved the area is," Feinberg said.

A compounding problem is that many families tend to use the emergency rooms of area hospitals to get treatment for relatively minor after-hours problems, such as a sore throat or low-grade fever, because the Mid-City clinic closes at 5 p.m.

Adding to the complexity is the growing multiethnic nature of the neighborhood. Those making the 25,000 visits a year to the Mid-City clinic are mainly Hispanic, but a growing number speak any of 38 languages.
About half of those visits are for pediatric health care, Feinberg said.

The idea currently is for Mid-City to rent a portion of the building purchased by Children's and provide regular clinic care from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. By 5 p.m., when Mid-City clinic staff members go home, Children's Hospital staff would take over, providing urgent-care services from 5 to 9 or 9:30 p.m.

Mid-City's existing clinic and services on Polk would remain, including its after-hours phone consultation for patients with urgent matters, Feinberg said.

A second agency, Social Advocates for Youth, would also work out of the building, providing an array of social service programs to go along with the clinical ones.

Last spring, Children's Hospital officials tried to buy a city library building on Fairmount Avenue between El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue in City Heights, but the bid was short and Children's lost out, Norton said.

Now the project is on hold.

Feinberg said she periodically calls Children's officials asking if they've found a building yet. "They say, 'Not yet,' but they've got a Realtor looking."

Norton said Children's is committed to eventually having a presence in City Heights, but hospital officials are holding out for a good location that provides good lighting for night access and is close to a bus line. County health director Dr. Robert K. Ross applauded the idea as one that could "strengthen access to care significantly for children in that community. Mid-City's is probably the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in the county, with lots of immigration issues and access-to-care problems."

Children's City Heights effort is one aspect of a larger campaign to provide health insurance to children of low-income families through a federally-subsidized program called Healthy Families.

Earlier this week, Gov. Gray Davis signed a budget that would make 125,000 more children eligible statewide for this program, many of them in the City Heights area.