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★★ City Edition ★★

Saturday, February 26, 2005

Health centers fear Bush cuts

By ALAN CROWELL
Staff Writer

BINGHAM — Molly Clark's two teenage sons have had a total of six cavities filled since a dentist came to the Bingham Area Health Center this summer.

Without those fillings, Clark, of Solon, said her sons probably would have lost teeth.

In fact, before this summer, the nearest dentist who would accept new Medicaid patients was about 212 hours away, said Clark, which meant that her sons really didn't have access to dental care.

Now, she said her boys not only have had their cavities filled, but they are taking better care of themselves.

"It inspired them to brush

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their teeth more," Clark said.

But it is unclear how much longer the Bingham Area Health Center and other affordable health care providers in rural areas will be able to provide a full range of health services.

With the threat of state and federal health care cuts looming and patient lists growing, the health centers, which already exist on razor-thin margins, are facing the possibility they may have to reduce the services they offer.

Friday, as U.S. Rep. Michael H. Michaud, D-2nd Dist., toured the health center and talked to Clark and center doctors, he expressed support for rural health centers and discussed efforts to address problems, including the difficulty of attracting new doctors to practice in rural areas.

The congressman's visit comes at a time when President George W. Bush has proposed roughly \$40 billion in Medicaid cuts.

Nationwide the \$300 billion program offers a health care safety net to 52 million poor elderly and disabled Americans.

In Maine, the program provides a vital piece of the funding that supports the 11 HealthReach Community Health Centers, including the one in Bingham.

Stephen E. Walsh, president &



Staff photo / ALAN CROWELL

Dr. Cynthia Robertson, from left, a physician at the Bingham Area Health Center, talks to U.S. Rep. Michael H. Michaud, D-2nd Dist., during Michaud's visit Friday.

CEO of the HealthReach Centers, said with a \$14 million budget, his organization ended the year just \$17,000 in the black.

He said the state is already considering cuts that would pull about \$215,000 from his bottom line, enough to push him well into the red.

"The reality is you don't run a business with a \$200,000 deficit for long," Walsh said.

With federal cuts threatened that could dwarf the proposed

state cuts, Walsh said the possibility that his organization might have to cut back on services is real.

He said the scenario becomes particularly alarming considering that two years ago, HealthReach was forced to find about \$700,000 in reductions.

Those cuts went to the bone, Walsh said. A new round of significant reductions could not happen without impacting services, he said.

In addition to Bingham's cen-

ter, HealthReach has 10 other centers including those in Albion, Belgrade, Rangeley, Richmond, Madison and Strong. They serve more than 38,000 Maine residents.

Because they provide preventive care that helps patients avoid expensive emergency room visits, the centers keep overall health care costs down, according to HealthReach officials.

Alan Crowell — 474-9534, Ext. 342
acrowell@centralmaine.com