OPINION - EDITORIALS

Editorial: Fund Denver Health like your life depends on it

Denver Health is in a dire financial position, and needs a cash infusion from the city



Dr. Amie Scott, left, and Laura Mattox, nurse practitioner, right, put on their personal protective equipment before seeing a patient in the Emergency Department at UCHealth University of Colorado Hospital in Aurora on March 13, 2023. (Photo by Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post)

By **THE DENVER POST EDITORIAL BOARD** |

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Denver Health cannot fail.

The safety-net hospital and regional Level 1 Trauma Center is in a dire financial position with the cost of providing care – especially for those with no means to pay — outstripping the revenue coming in.

The state stepped up and has allocated $5 million in the 2023 budget to shore up Denver Health's budget, but it is not enough.

Providing life-saving care for those who cannot pay is a moral imperative. Denver Health not only saves lives with expert trauma care for car crash and gun violence victims, but the hospital is a last resort for uninsured individuals with chronic, treatable illnesses like homeless individuals or undocumented Coloradans with diabetes, renal failure or cancer.

The City of Denver has long recognized the civic good of having a public hospital and has propped up the hospital's operations with additional funding. Taxpayers may not realize the good of a publicly funded hospital until their moment of most dire need when their insurance has lapsed between jobs, and they fall from the roof while cleaning gutters.

But Denver has not increased its contribution — $30 million a year – for 10 years, even as the cost of health care has skyrocketed.

Denver Health CEO Donna Lynne says both the amount of uncompensated care they are providing and the cost of providing it has increased in the aftermath of the pandemic. In 2020, uncompensated care was $60 million at Denver Health; in 2022, it was $120 million. Despite efforts to close the deficit, the hospital still loses monthly money.

"Right now, because of an increase in the number of patients we are seeing that are uninsured, the costs of health care which have really escalated post COVID and staffing, we've seen a doubling in two years of the cost of caring for people who are uninsured," Lynne said.

Additionally, the patients who do arrive at Denver Health are more frequently severely ill, suffering from substance abuse or mental illness, Lynne said.

Denver Health is not alone in its financial troubles, as The Denver Post's Meg Wingerter reported on the front page, that with the notable exceptions of HealthOne, and SCL Health, most hospitals across the state broke even or were in the red for the first half of 2022. Experts say 47% of hospitals in the state lost money on patient care in 2021.

Hospitals are suffering a staffing shortage spiral that is afflicting health care across the nation. Following the pandemic, there was a mass exodus of doctors and nurses who had worked selflessly and tirelessly to prevent systemic collapse during the worst days of COVID-19. Now, the nurses who remain can ask for higher salaries (they also deserve the extra pay) given the shortage in the labor market, and hospitals have turned to expensive traveling nurses to fill vacancies on an emergency basis.

Giving Denver Health a direct cash infusion will allow the hospital to attract permanent full-time staff, saving money on overtime and traveling nurses.

Stability is critical for any institution.

Gov. Jared Polis and Colorado's Joint Budget Committee members recognized the situation's urgency. Now we hope the incoming administration of the city does the same.

Denver Health will be a key partner as the state recovers from the drug crisis, the housing crisis, and the mental health crisis. If Denver Health fails, so will the Front Range.