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Report warns state to halt rapid loss of hospitals, beds

by Michael Lasalandra

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A Boston University report urges the state to ``carefully conserve'' its remaining hospital beds in this era of downsizing so there won't be a shortage as baby boomers grow old.

``We strongly suggest that the policy of hospital closings has been unreasonably oversold as a method of cost containment,'' states the report by Alan Sager and Deborah Socolar of the BU School of Public Health.

``The need for care will increase steadily in the years to come owing to the predictable aging of our state's population,'' it states. ``As a result, we find that the need for hospital beds is likely to outstrip availability by substantial amounts early in the next decade.''

The report was to be delivered at a legislative hearing today on bills that would identify needed and vulnerable hospitals and help to protect them from closing.

There are 14,600 beds in the state, a decrease of 6 percent from 1997 and 39 percent since 1970, according to the report, which projects the number will drop to 12,000 by 2005.

There are now 77 hospitals open in the state - down from 83 in 1997 and 127 in 1970.

``Conservatively, we project a drop of 12 more hospitals by the year 2005,'' the report states.

But the day may soon come when the state wishes many of those closed hospitals and closed beds were still around, according to the report. It compares the situation to the wholesale school closings of the 1970s and 1980s.

``During the 1970s and 1980s, many public schools were sold off or redeveloped as senior centers or condominiums and the like,'' it states. ``School boards seemed to assume that lower birth rates would prevail indefinitely, just as some health care experts seem to assume today that need for hospital care will drop indefinitely.''

To prevent the need to build new hospitals to replace those that have closed, Sager's report advises beds removed from service should be mothballed and maintained under license.





``This is most difficult when entire hospitals are closed and raises another question about any bed reduction strategy that relies heavily on closing entire hospitals," the report states.



The bills to be heard today would have the DPH draw up a list of hospitals that are needed to protect the public health and another list of those institutions that are facing financial distress.



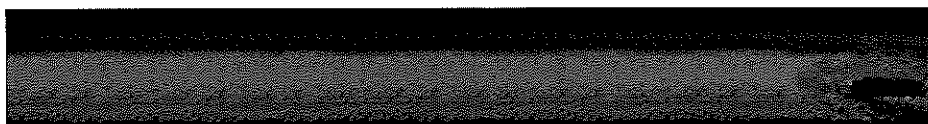
Any hospital on both lists would be eligible for financial aid from a revolving trust fund financed by a one-fourth of 1 percent assessment on hospital revenue statewide.

Such actions would give vulnerable hospitals a better chance to survive and would make it less likely they would have to sell to for-profit hospital corporations, the report states.

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