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Plan Could Close 20 or More New York Hospitals

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

A state commission today released a sweeping plan that could effectively eliminate 20 or more hospitals across New York State, force dozens of others to shrink or take on new roles and take away thousands of jobs.

The recommendations by the panel, the Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century, go far beyond the 9 hospital closures and assorted mergers and downsizings that state officials reported Monday after being briefed by the commission. They mark an epochal shift for an industry that has fiercely resisted shrinkage, often successfully, and that, person for person, has been much larger in New York than in other states for more than a century.

Unless they are rejected by Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) or the Legislature in December, the commission's recommendations will have the force of law. Most must be carried out in a year. They include closure and downsizing of a number of nursing homes, mostly upstate, in addition to changes in hospitals, though the nursing home reductions are not nearly as great.

The law that created the commission states that lawmakers must accept or reject its report whole, rather than taking some parts and refusing others.

Though the hospital closures, 5 of them in New York City, have received the most attention, other elements could be much more far-reaching. Stephen Berger, the commission chairman, said at a news conference that far more significant were the commission's proposals to reshape dozens of other hospitals through mergers, downsizing, the elimination of some services and the addition of others.

"The reason this is a big deal is the 48 reconfigurations," he said.

Under the plan, the state could end up with many fewer hospitals through actions that the commission does not label as closure:

¶ In two cases — one in the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens and one in Orange County — two hospitals would be consolidated into one.

¶ In Syracuse, two adjacent hospitals would merge and shrink significantly, all but becoming a single hospital, though not in name.

¶ Eight hospitals, mostly upstate, would cease to be general hospitals, losing all of their basic “medical/surgical” beds. Some would still admit patients for specialized services in alcohol or drug rehabilitation, or psychiatric treatment, while others would become strictly outpatient treatment centers.

¶ And in five cases, all upstate, the commission orders hospitals to merge or form strong ties short of merger, and if they fail to strike a deal within a year, it directs the state health commissioner to close one.

The commission said the hospitals and nursing homes slated for outright closure employ 7,000 people. That figure does not count thousands more jobs that would be lost in mergers, consolidations, elimination of wings and other steps.

But Mr. Berger, who was appointed by Mr. Pataki to lead the effort, and the commission’s executive director, David Sandman, said they did not expect any net loss of health-care jobs. The surviving institutions would get more business and would take on many of the workers from places that had closed, they said. And they noted that there is already a shortage of workers in many health-care jobs, particularly nursing.

Industry and labor officials reacted with alarm to the recommendations and began debating whether to mount a full-scale political battle to persuade the Legislature to vote down the plan. But a joint statement by Greater New York Hospital Association, the major downstate industry group, and the main health care workers union, 1199/S.E.I.U., was notable for its caution. It neither attacked the recommendations nor said what they would do next.

“This is a sad day for New York’s health care community,” they said. “The recommendations released today by the Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century — the breadth and scope of which far exceed what had been anticipated — would, if enacted, represent the most sweeping and dramatic restructuring of a health care system ever undertaken in the history of the United States.”

Mr. Berger, an investment banker who has served state government in various functions since the 1970s, said the commission explicitly ignored the political aspects of industry restructuring, including the predictable opposition.

As a whole, hospitals in New York State have lost money eight years in a row, and they are

consistently rated as being in worse financial shape than those in any other state. Dozens have closed in recent years, and even industry officials have grudgingly concluded that some must close so that the others can become stronger.

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