

Panel Said to Call for Closing 9 New York Hospitals

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ALBANY, Nov. 27 — A state commission plans to recommend Tuesday closing at least nine hospitals across the state — including five in New York City — and further cutting the state's mounting health care costs by forcing more hospitals to merge or to cut beds, according to several people briefed Monday on the panel's report.

The plan — which is being lauded and dreaded as one of the biggest efforts ever undertaken to overhaul the state's troubled health care system — is an all-or-nothing proposal that will become law unless the State Legislature or Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) acts in December to reject it in its entirety. By the law that created the commission, state officials cannot approve some of its recommendations while rejecting others.

All told, the panel is calling for cutting about 4,100 of New York State's roughly 60,000 hospital beds, according to two people who were briefed on the report and were granted anonymity because the report was not to be released until Tuesday. The panel, the New York State Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century, was created by state officials to review health care facilities in New York and recommend changes. The state holds the power to decertify hospitals — a potent stick it can wield to enforce compliance.

Five hospitals in New York City are marked to close outright, including two in Manhattan, St. Vincent's Midtown Hospital on West 51st Street and Cabrini Medical Center on East 19th Street; one in Brooklyn, Victory Memorial Hospital; one in the Bronx, New York Westchester Square Medical Center; and one in Queens, Parkway Hospital.

The current system is beloved by no one. Hospitals complain that they are struggling financially. State officials worry about the growing drain that health care costs place on taxpayer funds. So there has been a widespread recognition — even among union officials — that some hospitals will have to close to allow others to thrive. But closing hospitals can be a politically delicate affair that can arouse neighborhood opposition.

But some officials and others who were briefed on the plan, and who also were granted anonymity, said Monday night that the closings called for by the report were not as drastic as they had feared.

Aides to the governor declined to discuss the report before its release.

While the report speaks of officially closing nine hospitals in the state, they said, several other hospitals would effectively be closed by being forced to shed their beds to become clinics or outpatient facilities. That is the case with a sixth hospital that will effectively close in New York City, the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital on East 64th Street.

Four more hospitals in the state were chosen to be shut down: Millard Fillmore Gates Circle Hospital in Buffalo; St. Joseph Hospital in Cheektowaga, near Buffalo; Bellevue Woman's Hospital in Niskayuna, near Albany; and Community Hospital

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Still, the report is sure to set off a powerful political maelstrom.

Kenneth E. Raske, the president of the Greater New York Hospital Association, warned that it could lead to inadequate services. "The level of restructuring, which goes beyond closure — the size of the restructuring is astronomical," he said after he was briefed on the report. "The amount of money this will pull out of medical spending in New York will be in the billions. There is going to be service inadequacy and some real difficulty for hospitals."

And the political blowback was set to begin immediately. Assemblyman Paul A. Tokasz from Buffalo said that he planned to hold a news conference Tuesday to oppose the proposal to close St. Joseph Hospital. "I'm not happy," he said, warning that the closing would cost jobs in a region with a struggling economy. "I am prepared to argue that we need to reject this plan."

The commission, which is also calling for closing and reorganizing nursing homes in the state, also plans to recommend reconfiguring or merging several hospitals in New York City, an official briefed on the report said yesterday. The official said that the panel intends to call for merging at least three pairs of hospitals in the city: Peninsula Hospital Center and St. John's Episcopal Hospital South Shore in Far Rockaway, Queens, which would allow the creation of a new facility of about 400 beds; North General Hospital and Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan; and New York Methodist Hospital in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and New York Community Hospital in Midwood, Brooklyn.

The official also said that the commission would urge the conversion of detoxification beds at [Beth Israel Medical Center](#) in Manhattan to beds for elderly psychiatric patients; the addition of about 40 surgery beds to Queens Hospital Center, in Jamaica; and the closing of an ambulatory wing at Split Rock Rehabilitation and Health Care Center in the Bronx.

The panel's recommendations, long a closely held secret, began to emerge Monday night after panel members briefed state officials and players in the health care industry. Some aspects of the plan, including the New York City hospitals marked for closing, were first reported last week by [The New York Sun](#).

The panel tried to ensure that there were alternative hospitals available nearby and took into consideration how much health care for the indigent each hospital provided before recommending closing or cutting it. Several people said that the hospitals run by New York City's Health and Hospitals Corporation appeared to be left unscathed.

Some recommendations could be difficult to put into place. In upstate New York, for example, the plan calls for merging two privately owned hospitals, and for merging a privately owned hospital with a state hospital. The state has won the promise of \$1.5 billion in federal money to help hospitals cover the significant short-term costs of closing, which can be used as an incentive.

New York's hospitals have been in crisis for years because of declining demand, pressures from health insurers and their high debt. State officials hope that by closing some hospitals and cutting costs at others, they will allow the healthier hospitals to survive and thrive while reducing the costs of the state's Medicaid program, the government health care plan for the poor, which costs about \$45 billion a year.

Michael Cooper reported from Albany and Sewell Chan from New York.

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