

## **Senior clinic at Alaska Regional to close in February, leaving vulnerable patients with limited options for care**

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Alaska Regional Senior Clinic

The Alaska Regional Senior Health Clinic, located on Debarr Road, is closing at the end of February, leaving patients searching for new providers with limited options in Anchorage. Photographed on January 18, 2023. (Marc Lester / ADN)

A longtime Anchorage medical clinic for seniors has announced it's closing at the end of February, prompting concern from patients and providers about dwindling health care options locally for some of Anchorage's most vulnerable residents.

The Alaska Regional Senior Health Clinic is one of few facilities in Anchorage that accepts people on Medicare — federal health insurance for people 65 or older and certain younger people with disabilities — without any limits or caps on new patients.

The clinic, which has served Anchorage seniors for over a decade, will close Feb. 28, according to hospital spokeswoman Kjerstin Lastufka, who cited staffing challenges as the reason for the closure.

"We have been unable to keep key positions filled at the clinic and at this time, we can no longer maintain clinic operations," Lastufka wrote in an email noting broader national health care worker shortages.

While Lastufka declined to provide an estimate of how many people would be affected by the closure, multiple patients and providers interviewed for this story expressed concern that the clinic's closure will have a significant impact in a community that already has few options for older adults who use Medicare.

Alaska's senior population has been growing over the last decade while at the same time its health care workforce has been shrinking, due to a complicated mix of economic and pandemic-related retirements and career shifts.

"We are concerned and sad about the lack of care for seniors in Alaska," said Shannon Savage, chief communications and development officer with the Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center. "The clinic closure itself has not caused this problem. However it has highlighted this deeper underlying issue that has been here for many, many years."

[Alaska has long struggled with a shortage of nurses. The pandemic made it worse.]

Reached by phone this week, several of the clinic's patients also said they were frustrated by the way the facility handled the closure. They said that communicating with the clinic was challenging — they had important health appointments canceled last minute, their calls to the clinic in recent weeks went unanswered and some still haven't received notice that the clinic is closing.

#### Unanswered calls

At the end of October, 69-year-old Tina Spears showed up for her scheduled appointment at Alaska Regional Senior Clinic, and was told it needed to be canceled. So she made another appointment for the next available slot — in early January. "And then they called me in January and told me they had to cancel that appointment too, and to call back to reschedule," she said. "And after that, I was never able to get through."

The reason for the appointment was that Spears was trying out a new medication, and her doctor wanted to help determine whether the drug was benefiting her or not. Without any guidance, she eventually just stopped taking the drug.

For Spears, the most frustrating part of the experience was the lack of communication.

"I just kept persisting and trying to get through on the line," she said. "But I wasn't even able to leave them a message."

#### Tina Spears

Tina Spears photographed in Anchorage on Thursday, Jan. 19, 2023. (Emily Mesner / ADN)

For a full week in January, Cheryl Chapman, 76, also called the clinic to get ahold of her primary care provider, whom she had been seeing for years. She wasn't feeling well. She says her calls went unanswered, or simply wouldn't go through.

She felt progressively worse as the week went by. "By the time I couldn't breathe and went to the emergency room — that was Tuesday — I was pretty sick," she said.

Chapman, speaking by phone Friday while recovering from what ER physicians diagnosed as pneumonia, said she was deeply concerned by the clinic's closure, which she found out about this past week in a letter addressed to "dear patient."

"We understand that changes in your healthcare provider can be difficult," the letter said. "Please feel free to reach out to us with any questions." It also provided the phone number for the clinic's front desk, which Chapman and others said they had had little luck reaching in recent days and weeks. As of Saturday, the clinic's website did not mention the closure.

Chapman doesn't think a month is enough time for many patients to find a new provider, especially with the limited options available.

"It is not just the impact. It's the timing of the impact," she said. "Because, you know, if someone said to you, you got to find another doctor, usually what you do is you call friends. And you say, who's good. But there does not appear to be time."

Chapman said she believes the clinic's closure "is going to be a calamity." She cited Alaska's growing senior population, the fact that many of the clinic's displaced patients have cognitive problems and may have trouble quickly finding a new provider, and the general scarcity of providers in Anchorage and statewide who can accept Medicare patients.

#### Highlighting a community-wide shortage

Alaska's population is on average younger than the overall population, but its retirement-age population has grown sharply in recent years, according to state demographic data. In the last four decades, the share of Alaskans 71 and older has increased several times over, from a little over 1% to close to 8%. The resulting increased demand may tax the state's limited resources.

[Alaska's population is still younger than US but is aging at a dramatic rate]

The Alaska Regional clinic's closure highlights an existing shortage of health care options in Anchorage for older adults with federal insurance, according to Savage, with the Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center.

Just two providers remain in the municipality that accept new Medicare patients without any cap on the number of enrollees: Providence Medical Group Primary Care and Anchorage Neighborhood Health, the latter which is a federally qualified health center.

While other providers are able to accept a limited number of patients on Medicare, most can only afford to accept a limited number of these patients due to low reimbursement rates.

"Anecdotally, what we've heard that if a patient is trying to find care, what they mostly hear is, we're not accepting Medicare patients right now," Savage said. "They wind up having to call a high number of providers to find someone."

That's true for Jana Barlow, 66, who has been struggling to find a new provider in Anchorage after experiencing difficulties with Alaska Regional Senior Clinic, where she received care for more than four years.

Barlow made an appointment for October, and when she arrived, she says she was told the clinic "couldn't accommodate her," and rescheduled her for 10 weeks later. Two days before that appointment, the clinic called to cancel that one, too.

They told her the next available appointment wasn't for six months.

This week, Barlow has been calling providers all over Anchorage to find someone who accepts Medicare. She said she received 10 no's on Wednesday alone.

“I got a list here. I keep marking them off,” she said. “It’s really really frustrating. I’m so full of anxiety, I’m shaking. I have a lot of health problems, and this is not helping, losing my health care provider.”

Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center is a federally qualified health center, which means it receives government funding to provide services to underinsured or uninsured Alaskans, and accepts Medicare and Medicaid without limits.

But Savage explained that for many other providers, it can be difficult to accept Medicare patients and still make a profit.

“Medicare has never been a generous payer,” she said. “The medicare reimbursement rates are in no way aligned with the cost to deliver care. It is often times a financial hardship for a clinic to be a Medicare provider.”

In an email, Lastufka with Alaska Regional said the reason for the clinic closure was not prompted by financial problems, but rather “directly related to the difficulties with staffing and being able to keep key positions filled.”

Scrambling to find solutions

Savage said she also spent an afternoon this week trying to call the Alaska Regional Senior Health Clinic but was unable to get through to anyone.

Anchorage Neighborhood Health and other providers are scrambling to try to find community solutions and resources for the displaced patients, she said. And they are concerned about their own capacity to take on a surge of new patients.

“The problem is, we are not a senior care clinic,” Savage said. Typically, the clinic is able to accept around 200 new patients a month — but that includes everyone, from babies to elders.

And while usually the wait time for new patients is around two weeks, Savage said she’s concerned it could be longer if there’s an influx of new patients.

“We imagine that wait will go up significantly,” she said, adding that it would help to know how many patients were being displaced from Alaska Regional.

Lastufka said she was “unable to give any information about patient numbers” at the Alaska Regional clinic.

Providence Medical Group Primary Care is also an option for seniors who rely on Medicare, Mikal Canfield, a hospital spokesman, said in an email.

“However, the number of new patients is limited to ensure our established patients are not negatively impacted. The average wait time for new patients is 21 days,” he wrote.

Savage said she and others are working on trying to put together a list of other providers in Anchorage who are accepting Medicare patients, and hopes to have more information soon.

“We see this as an issue that needs to be a coordinated effort,” she said.