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**Safety authority opposes Corbett's budget plan**

Health Care Cost Containment Council also would lose independence.

March 13, 2012 | By Tim Darragh, Of The Morning Call

To the voracious state budget, the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority doesn't even rate as a snack.

And the equally obscure Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council accounts for a few crumbs on the taxpayer-paid plate.

But the two agencies have something going for them that most of Harrisburg's much larger state bureaucracies do not: independence.

The agencies, which collect and analyze data used to make hospitals and other health care institutions safer and more efficient, say that being above political influence is crucial to their effectiveness, which is why supporters are beginning to push back against Gov. Tom Corbett's plan to move them under the wing of the state Department of Health.

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The safety authority's board last week adopted a resolution calling on Corbett and the General Assembly to leave it alone, saying the consolidation would diminish its information collection and education.

"These people have built great relationships, great trust," the authority's chairman, Stan Smullens, said this week. "We're very, very concerned that trust will be taken away."

The authority collects information on mistakes and "near misses" that occur in health care institutions. It guarantees the senders that the information will not identify them, a practice that results in much more information being shared.

With its analysis, the state's hospitals have gotten important feedback on issues such as wrong-site surgeries, hospital-associated infections and properly identifying patients. The authority then can advocate for a "best practice," which likely has contributed to decreases in infections and other preventable mishaps.

Identifying and fixing health care mistakes puts Pennsylvania ahead of the curve that will come in 2014 when the federal health care law takes full effect and puts a premium on reducing unnecessary costs, added Terry Hyman, another board member.

The board members noted that the authority does not spend taxpayer money. It is funded by assessments on hospitals and other health care providers, an arrangement approved 10 years ago when the state addressed out-of-control medical malpractice insurance rates.

"The trial lawyers, hospitals and doctors are all in favor of this," Hyman said.

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Health

Tom Corbett

The cost containment council hasn't taken a position on Corbett's plan, said Executive Director Joe Martin. The council, which provides data on outcomes for specific hospitals and other health care providers to identify the most effective and efficient within their fields, receives about \$2.6 million a year from the state, Martin said.

That would be about 0.01 percent of the state's \$27.14 billion proposed budget.

Bringing the agencies under the state's wing would not harm their missions, said Health Department spokeswoman Christine Cronkright.

"We can create cost and operational efficiencies in administration, while maintaining firewalls within the department that will allow separation, while eliminating duplication of resources and services," she said.

More comprehensive reporting would cut paperwork for hospitals and create a single report for consumers, she said. For example, both the department and the authority report on health care-associated infections. Unifying the organizations would allow them to develop a single report that would provide "all indicators and one voice for this critical patient safety issue," Cronkright said.

Third-party observers are not sold, however.

"You start rolling them into the bureaucracy and they lose their identity, their independence and their effectiveness," said Tom Croyle, president of the Lehigh Valley Business Coalition on Health Care.

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He said several employers already have contacted him about fighting the plan.

Similarly, Michael Cohen of the Institute of Safe Medication Practices in Horsham Township, Montgomery County, which analyzes the authority's data, said that putting the regulator and the information collector together would discourage individuals and institutions from reporting incidents that would reflect poorly on them.

"People are going to be afraid to communicate," he said.

The agency officials said they've had some feedback from legislators, but that it's too early to know where their fate is headed.

"Their plan," Smullens said, "is to let it go through the budget process."

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