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## Dozens will lose medical jobs in Kaiser takeover

By **Kathleen Wilson**, [kwilson@VenturaCountyStar.com](mailto:kwilson@VenturaCountyStar.com)  
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About 100 people will lose their jobs in the wake of Kaiser Permanente's acquisition of Ventura County's largest medical group, officials said Wednesday.

The giant HMO bought Buena Ventura Medical Group in June, but the number of local workers Kaiser would hire has been unknown until now. This week, though, managers are trying to reach all 270 employees to tell them whether they got one of the 165 jobs or not, Kaiser spokesman Jim Anderson said.

Medical assistant Elza Escutia said she was relieved to get an offer — and for \$1 more an hour than she's making now.

"I was, 'Oh my God, thank God,'" said Escutia, 28, of Oxnard.

But the word was not so good for Laura Garcia, a single mother with sons 11 and 5.

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"I totally thought I had a chance," the medical assistant said.

Although the timing around Thanksgiving Day is unfortunate, managers wanted to get the offers out as quickly as they nailed them down, Anderson said.

"We wish we could have done it sooner," he said.

The spokesman said the number of jobless workers can't be calculated precisely because some employees may reject the offers, opening up spots for others. "There may be another wave of job offers, depending on how many people decline," he said.

Still the number appears to run around 100, said Jim Malone, CEO of Ventura Medical Management, the administrative arm of BMG.

Most of their jobs will expire at the end of the year when BMG stops seeing patients and Kaiser takes over. About 15 will work for a few months closing down the business side of the operations in 2007, Malone said.

Help for those laid off

Kaiser, Buenaventura and Ventura County's Human Services Agency will be working together to help the displaced workers find jobs, Malone said.

"I want to stress very strongly that BMG is doing everything it can to help people find a job," he said. "Individual physicians are calling people in the community. Everybody is trying to do the right thing by helping people find a position. The

good news is that in western Ventura County there is a shortage of employees, so hopefully everybody will be able to find a position."

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He said they will be eligible for unemployment and severance pay. A job fair is scheduled Dec. 5 in Ventura.

Christy Norton, who manages a program aiding laid-off workers for the Human Services Agency, said she hopes 14 or 15 employers will show up at the fair. Layoffs were expected for medical assistants, a variety of clerical, data and claims workers, and records technicians, she said.

Anderson said he could not say which positions were disproportionately affected. The work force serving Buenaventura's clinics includes nurses, medical assistants, receptionists, and billing-and-collections workers, Malone said.

With an unemployment rate of 4.0 percent in the county, this could be a good time to be looking for a job, business officials said.

"The thing we're hearing from all employers is that they are really having a hard time finding people," said Nancy Lindholm, president of the Oxnard Chamber of Commerce.

Some unknowns in equation

Managers looked at their needs, the applicant pool and the patient volume expected before making the decision, Anderson said. Buenaventura operates clinics in Oxnard, Ventura and Camarillo, serving about 90,000 patients a year.

Anderson said he could not say what kind of volume Kaiser expects because enrollments are still going on.

The move comes a few weeks after Buenaventura managers decided to terminate the jobs of perhaps nine nurse practitioners and physician assistants out of a staff of 12, Malone said. Some of those will stay on until the end of the year.

The step was taken both because of a decline in patients at Buenaventura and because Kaiser will not need them, he said.

About 40 of the 65 doctors that formed the group will remain. Most of the others took positions as hospital-based doctors or were not

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offered jobs by Kaiser.

Anderson said some employees may be hired back as patient volume increases.

Some patients are rejecting Kaiser's coverage as the organization expands in western Ventura County because managers only recently nailed down a local hospital contract for next year.

Dr. John Keats, a longtime obstetrician-gynecologist at Buenaventura, predicts that will change.

"When people realize it's the same doctors and the same care and they can be hospitalized locally, people sitting on the fence will realize Kaiser is going to be OK."

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