

# IHC to fill health care gaps, but at what cost?

Until four years ago, Summit County residents knew they could drive up to the Park City Family Health Center on Bonanza Drive in the middle of the night and find a doctor. In December 1999, though, the company managing the clinic, University of Utah Health Network, decided it was not cost effective to keep the doors open past 11 p.m. That came as a shock to some of Park City's paramedics who had not been informed of the closure and to plenty of residents suffering from a variety of non-life threatening middle-of-the-night bouts with injuries or illnesses who drove up to the clinic and found the doors locked.

UUHN's decision to shut the clinic at night touched off a battle pitting the community and physicians against the management company. UUHN ultimately left town and turned the clinic back over to the local physicians. But 24-hour care was never restored.

As a result, over the last four years, Summit County residents and visitors unlucky enough to hurt themselves or fall ill after the clinic's closing time have learned to

drive themselves to a hospital in Heber or Salt Lake City or call 911 for an ambulance.

That should change next month, thanks to a generous offer from Intermountain Health Care to underwrite a nightly after-hours clinic (from 9 p.m. to 8 a.m.) at the Park City Family Health Center.

Local doctors will staff the clinic through the night and, according to IHC, no one will be turned away regardless of their health insurance affiliation. As an added bonus, IHC also has agreed to partner with the People's Health Clinic by allowing the group to move its twice-weekly clinics from their mobile van to the more spacious and better-equipped clinic location.

IHC must be commended for this demonstration of commitment to Park City and Summit County and especially for their willingness to support the People's Health Clinic.

But the health care giant will have to forgive us if we seem suspicious of their ultimate motives. The University of Utah took over management of the local physician's group by making some of the same promis-

es, then changed their tactics once they were in control.

IHC is the largest health care provider in the state. The company insures nearly half a million residents, three times as many as the next largest insurer. Though the organization is a nonprofit, it has been known to wield some heavy-handed corporate tactics to maintain a monopoly in Utah's health care industry. An example is IHC's recent decision to require patients in Salt Lake County and Bountiful to sign binding arbitration agreements, forcing them to give up the right to pursue legal claims against their physicians. Could Park City be next?

Park City is becoming an IHC company town – and that makes us nervous. When the only game in town is an IHC group plan, an IHC hospital, IHC doctors and an IHC-run clinic – that doesn't leave patients with much leverage.

Nevertheless, since the individual physicians in Summit County and taxpayers seem to be unwilling to underwrite the cost of an all-night clinic, we are grateful to IHC for coming forward to provide this vital service.