

HEALTH

Cancer patient gets help with bills

IN SHIFT, KAISER PROVIDES RELIEF ON HIS DEBTS

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Kaiser Permanente has forgiven thousands of dollars in past-due bills for

Tony Andrade, a Sacramento man whose fight with cancer was recounted two months ago by The Bee.

The HMO informed Andrade, who has no health insurance, of its decision in a series of letters. Andrade, 47, racked up tens of thousands in medical bills from visits to Kaiser emergency rooms, some dating to 2006.

Kaiser did not explain why it reversed an earlier decision to deny Andrade's request for relief from his debts. Like other health care providers, the HMO has seen unpaid bills soar as the economy soured.

Last year, Kaiser Permanente's Northern California operations provided approximately \$59 million in medical financial assistance, more than double the amount spent the year be-

fore, the company said.

The Bee recounted Andrade's story in a three-part series describing his treatment for a bladder tumor and the financial difficulties he faced.

Despite having a job, Andrade had no health insurance and not enough money to pay the bills that soon arrived. A county program for the medically indigent swooped in to help - paying for surgery and specialists to remove his cancer - but not soon enough to pay for expensive trips to the emergency room, including the one in June that led to the discovery of a tumor in his bladder.

Tens of thousands of dollars in medical bills have piled up in his shoe box, the most recent arriving a few

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days after Christmas last year - \$9,724 from Kaiser Permanente for the ER visit on June 17, a day when he found blood in his urine.

Andrade tried earlier to get the HMO to forgive his debt through its financial assistance program, but was turned down.

Last month, a Kaiser representative called to invite Andrade to reapply. He did.

"I knew she was trying to help me take care of them bills. ... She just called me out of the blue," said Andrade.

While Kaiser officials declined to discuss Andrade's case, the company issued a statement saying it was "pleased to be working with him on identifying appropriate Kaiser Permanente medical financial assistance pro-



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Anthony Andrade is helped by nurse Jennifer Scott, right, at Sutter Medical Center in October as his mother, Sandra Cooper, looks on.

grams for which he is eligible."

In 2008, California hospitals wrote off nearly \$1.2 billion in bad debts and provided \$973.4 million in charity care. Hospitals offer such free care in part to meet federal requirements for nonprofit status.

Andrade welcomes the prospect of resuming his day-to-day life without thousands of bills hanging over his head. Two months of radiation therapy are done, but his fight

against cancer isn't over. Doctors later this month will measure his progress.

He expects to return to work next month as a driver for a medical transport service.

"I don't know about starting anew, but it'll give me the opportunity to get back on the right direction," Andrade said.

Call The Bee's Bobby Caina Calvan, (916) 321-1067.