

Nonprofit Hospitals

Inconsistent Data Obscure the Economic Value of Their Benefit to Communities, and the Franchise Tax Board Could More Closely Monitor Their Tax-Exempt Status

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Board of Equalization's, Franchise Tax Board's, and Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development's responses as of December 2008

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee (audit committee) requested the Bureau of State Audits to conduct an audit to ascertain whether the activities performed by hospitals that are exempt from paying taxes because of their nonprofit status truly qualify as allowable activities consistent with their exempt purpose. Specifically, the audit committee requested that we determine the roles of the entities involved in determining tax exemptions and the extent of oversight they exercise over nonprofit hospitals to ensure that they comply with requirements for tax exemption and community benefit reporting. It also asked us to examine the financial reports and any community benefit documents prepared during the last five years by a sample of both nonprofit hospitals and hospitals that operate on a for-profit basis and determine the value and type of community benefits and uncompensated care provided. In addition, the audit committee asked us to compare the community benefits provided by nonprofit and for-profit hospitals, and compare the types of care that both types of hospitals provide without receiving compensation (uncompensated care). Further, the audit committee asked us to review the financial information and the claims submitted to the State Board of Equalization (Equalization) or other agencies by nonprofit hospitals to determine whether they meet income requirements to qualify for tax-exempt status and to assess how tax-exempt nonprofit hospitals use excess income, to ensure that the uses are permissible and reasonable in terms of expansion of plant and facilities, additions to operating reserve, and the timing of debt retirement. The audit committee also asked us to determine the most current estimated total annual value of the taxation exemptions of both state corporation income taxes (income taxes) and local property taxes for nonprofit hospitals.

Finally, the audit committee asked us to determine whether the community benefits and uncompensated care provided by nonprofit hospitals meet the requirements for exemption from local property and state income tax. However, although state law outlines the requirements a nonprofit hospital must meet to receive an exemption from paying taxes, it does not specify community benefits and uncompensated-care costs as requirements. Additionally, although state law requires most tax-exempt hospitals to annually submit to the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development (Health Planning) a community benefits plan (plan), which may include an uncompensated-care element, the law also clearly states that the information included in the plan a nonprofit hospital submits cannot be used to justify its tax-exempt status.

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of tax-exempt hospitals revealed the following:

- » *About 223 of California's 344 hospitals are eligible for income and property tax exemptions because they are organized and operated for nonprofit purposes.*
- » *Comparing financial data reported by nonprofit and for-profit hospitals indicated the uncompensated care provided by the two types of hospitals was not significantly different.*
- » *Benefits provided to the community, which only nonprofit hospitals are required to report, differentiate nonprofit hospitals from for-profit hospitals, but the categories of services and the associated economic value are not consistently reported among nonprofit hospitals.*
- » *The values of tax-exempt buildings and contents owned by nonprofit hospitals are frequently misreported by county assessors.*
- » *Lacking more reliable data, we used the reported economic values of community benefits and tax-exempt property to estimate that reported community benefits of \$656 million for 2005 were roughly 2.7 times the estimated \$242 million in state corporation income taxes and property taxes not collected from nonprofit hospitals.*
- » *The Franchise Tax Board, which administers state income tax exemptions, could better use available tools, such as annual filings and audits, to monitor the continuing eligibility of nonprofit hospitals for their tax exemption.*

Finding #1: Lack of specific guidance regarding the content of community benefit plans precludes any meaningful comparison of the plans.

Although state law requires that tax-exempt hospitals submit plans to Health Planning, it does not require Health Planning to review the plans to ensure that hospitals report the same types of data consistently, nor does Health Planning do so. Further, the law provides only limited guidance regarding the content of the plan and does not mandate a uniform reporting standard. Thus, in reviewing the plans that eight tax-exempt hospitals submitted from 2002 through 2006, we found significant variations in the plans that precluded us from performing any meaningful comparison of the economic values the hospitals reported. Although the guidance provided in the law does not require uniform reporting, two hospital associations offer hospitals some guidelines. Additionally, the Internal Revenue Services (IRS) is proposing a new schedule for hospitals to prepare to be included with the informational return that all income-tax-exempt organizations must file. If adopted, the IRS anticipates using the new schedule for the 2008 tax year. The new schedule will require tax-exempt hospitals to report their community benefits and uncompensated-care costs and could influence hospitals to pattern their plans after the schedule's methodologies and format.

We recommended that if the Legislature expects plans to contain comparable and consistent data, it consider enacting statutory requirements that prescribe a mandatory format and methodology for tax-exempt nonprofit hospitals to follow when presenting community benefits in their plans. We also recommended that if the Legislature intends that the exemptions from income and property taxes granted to nonprofit hospitals should be based on hospitals providing a certain level of community benefits, it consider amending state law to include such requirements.

Legislative Action: Legislation proposed.

Assembly Bill 2942 was introduced to require a standardized format and methodology to be used when presenting community benefit information. The bill did not pass during the 2007—08 Regular Session.

Finding #2: Errors in reported property values reduce the reliability of estimated property taxes not paid by tax-exempt hospitals.

We attempted to estimate the amount of property taxes not collected from tax-exempt hospitals, using the values of the buildings and contents owned by tax-exempt hospitals that county assessors submitted on statistical reports to Equalization. Although we found numerous errors in the values that prevented us from ensuring the reliability of our calculation, this methodology resulted in an estimated \$184 million in uncollected property taxes in 2005. More specifically, we found errors in the reported values for four of the 12 hospitals we reviewed, representing a total error of about \$204 million. The errors for the remaining 211 nonprofit hospitals in the State that are eligible for tax exemption are unknown. Equalization performs surveys of county assessors to determine the adequacy of the procedures and practices they apply in valuing property for the purpose of taxation and for administering property tax exemptions.

To ensure that it provides accurate information regarding the value that is tax exempt, we recommended that Equalization consider including in its surveys of the county tax assessors a process for verifying the accuracy of the values reported on the annual statistical reports submitted by the county assessors.

Equalization's Action: Corrective action taken.

Equalization indicated that its survey of county assessors now includes a review of the exemption values contained in the county assessors' annual statistical reports. It also stated that it uses a survey review worksheet to examine individual exemption claim records for proper classification by the county assessors and to ask questions of assessors personnel on their practices and procedures. Finally, Equalization issued a letter to all county assessors informing them of our finding and that it was incorporating these verification steps into its survey of the county assessors.

Finding #3: Recent legislation affects the Franchise Tax Board's responsibilities for granting income tax exemptions.

We found minor weaknesses in the process the Franchise Tax Board (tax board) used in the past to determine the eligibility of nonprofit hospitals for state income tax exemptions. However, legislation effective January 1, 2008, will allow the tax board to rely on the federal income tax exemptions determined by the IRS. Although it was unable to obtain IRS reports and other information on the federal review process and thus could not gain a full understanding of the method the IRS uses to determine eligibility for tax exemptions, the tax board contended that its research of the IRS web site, publications, and tax law enabled it to conclude that the IRS process is sufficient to ensure proper determination of state exemption status. The tax board also stated that because state and federal laws on tax exemption are essentially identical, the additional audits it plans to perform—made possible by the workload reduction resulting from its use of IRS eligibility determinations—will compensate for any differences in quality between the state and federal review processes. The tax board indicated, however, that until it identifies the actual savings in workload that may occur when the new law is implemented, it cannot evaluate the opportunities for performing audits of nonprofit hospitals or plan for the number or frequency of such audits.

We recommended that, after it identifies the staff resources that are no longer required for reviewing tax exemption applications, the tax board implement its plan to use those resources for performing audits of tax-exempt entities, including hospitals.

Tax Board's Action: Corrective action taken.

The tax board indicated that it has begun to realize staff resource savings from the new exemption application process and is redirecting those resources to perform compliance audits. The tax board also reported that for calendar year 2008 to date, it opened 55 audits and completed 24 compared to this same time last year, when it opened 10 audits and completed four.

Finding #4: The tax board has limited assurance that nonprofit hospitals remain eligible for state income tax exemptions.

The tax board does not use the tools available to it, such as annual filings and audits, to monitor the continuing eligibility of nonprofit hospitals for income tax exemption. According to management staff at the tax board, annual filings, which contain information such as financial data and changes in business activities, offer the tax board's Exempt Organizations Unit (unit) a useful tool for reviewing ongoing compliance with the requirements for maintaining tax-exempt status. However, the unit does not review the information in the annual filings. Management at the tax board stated that the large volume of initial applications for income tax exemptions and limited personnel prevent unit staff from reviewing the annual filings. In the absence of monitoring by the tax board, hospitals exempt from income taxes sometimes submit annual filings that do not contain all the information required by the form or its instructions or information required under the California Code of Regulations (regulations).

Regular auditing is another tool the tax board could use to monitor the tax-exempt status of nonprofit hospitals. However, the tax board does not regularly conduct audits of tax-exempt hospitals, even though, based on data provided by the tax board, the revenues of these hospitals represent 17 percent of the total revenue of all tax-exempt organizations. According to the tax board, an audit can originate when members of the public express concern that a tax-exempt organization may be functioning in a manner requiring revocation of its tax-exempt status. The tax board indicated, however, that it could not identify any complaints that might have prompted audits of tax-exempt hospitals, because it does not maintain a central record of the receipt or disposition of those complaints. Rather, complaints against tax-exempt organizations are stored in the tax board's files and cannot be easily retrieved.

The tax board stated that the revenue information from annual filings entered into its automated record-keeping system could be used to identify income-tax-exempt nonprofit hospitals to be considered for audit. However, because the tax board has not ensured that all tax-exempt nonprofit

hospitals are distinctly identified in its electronic data system, it is unable to efficiently generate a list of the hospitals that might require audits. According to the tax board, creating such a list would necessitate manually reviewing the hard-copy files of the approximately 72,000 tax-exempt organizations operating in the State to determine which are tax-exempt hospitals.

Finally, the tax board told us that the IRS expects to perform an audit within three to five years after each organization receives a federal tax exemption, and it would notify the tax board of any revocations. However, the tax board does not currently coordinate with the IRS to identify audits of California tax-exempt hospitals in a manner that would allow the tax board to adequately rely on IRS audits for assurance of continuing eligibility.

We recommended that the tax board consider developing methodologies to monitor nonprofit hospitals' continuing eligibility for income tax exemption. These methodologies should include the following activities:

- Review the financial and other information from the annual filing submitted by hospitals exempt from income taxes.
- Ensure that the annual filing contains all the information the tax board's regulations specify as necessary for determining eligibility for an income tax exemption.
- Track complaints in a manner that enable the tax board to identify potential trends in noncompliance by income-tax-exempt hospitals and initiate audits of those hospitals.
- Adequately identify tax-exempt hospitals in its automated database, enabling it to use the information in the database to profile those hospitals and identify any potential noncompliance with the law.

The tax board should also gain an understanding of the frequency and depth of IRS audits of tax-exempt hospitals to identify the extent to which it can rely on IRS audits and factor that reliance into its monitoring efforts.

Tax Board's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The tax board stated that it is developing an audit program to review the annual filings from the hospitals to gain a better understanding of compliance issues and materiality thresholds for ongoing reviews. In addition, the tax board indicated that it is finalizing business requirements for enhancements to its case management system that will provide data collection, modeling, and audit selection capabilities. It plans to implement these enhancements in November 2009. The tax board also reported that it has implemented a new procedure to log all complaints into a computer database that documents the organization name, type, issue, and action taken. Additionally, the tax board stated that it has updated the codes in its business entities accounting system to separately identify tax-exempt hospitals from other types of charitable organizations. Finally, the tax board indicated that a Memorandum of Understanding with the IRS was signed September 2008, authorizing the tax board to receive federal information about exempt organizations including proposed and final revocations, audit adjustments, and reports.