

Trauma center prognosis better

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Broward doctor fills in, another to come

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A visiting neurosurgeon will help out and another is in the pipeline for hire, creating hope that Lee County's only **trauma center** may stay alive this year.

The Lee County Trauma Services District board met Tuesday to hear the latest developments in its ongoing struggle for money and surgeons to maintain the cash-strapped trauma program.

The Lee Memorial Health System, which operates the **trauma center** at a loss of about \$10 million a year, was forced to send the state a six-month trauma closure notice after two neurosurgeons left last month, putting the **trauma center** in even more peril as it struggles to meet state standards of coverage.

The remaining two neurosurgeons can't man their own practices and cover trauma 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Lee Memorial President Jim Nathan said.

"That's just not realistic," he said.

Some relief is coming in the form of Broward neurosurgeon Dr. Ceslovas Vaicys, who agreed to cover trauma services in Lee County two weekends a month through June, beginning this weekend.

The move is the second time the South Broward Hospital District has stepped in to help Lee Memorial's trauma challenges.

The first was last May when Broward agreed to leverage some money for a federal and state Medicaid grant program that will net Lee's **trauma center** \$962,500 sometime this year.

"Again, Broward is bailing out Lee County," said trauma surgeon Dr. Dean Goldberg. "But the bottom line is we need stabilization, including long-term financial support."

A second neurosurgeon has agreed to work for Lee Memorial in July after he finishes training at a renowned spine institute, hospital officials said.

Neither Lee Memorial nor Southwest Florida Neurosurgical Associates - a group of five Lee County neurosurgeons - have been able to reach an agreement on working together for trauma coverage.

Securing financial support - either through a local trauma-only tax or through statewide funding initiatives - will be the key to survival, board members said.

Trauma board members approved a motion to personally approach state legislators to lobby for a long-term funding plan.

"There's a tremendous need for us to continue to communicate with them and encourage them ...," said Pete Doragh, who was appointed Tuesday as co-chair of a new regional advisory committee on trauma services.

"They've got to do something, it's got to involve money and I don't see any way around that."