

Survey good news for trauma care

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Most state residents say DUI fines should fund services

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Drunken drivers and other traffic violators should pay for trauma care throughout Florida, most residents agreed in a statewide survey released this week.

The Alliance to Save Florida's Trauma Care, a group of health care providers representing all 20 of Florida's remaining trauma centers, found 87 percent of residents would probably back an increase in DUI fines to support trauma care.

The survey also found 78 percent of residents likely would support increasing other traffic fines such as for speeding or running a stoplight.

The report, conducted by Beacon Research, is good news for **trauma center** advocates. They say the need all the support they can get this year as they lobby legislators to pass some sort of statewide funding plan.

"This basically says Floridians are starting to understand that a trauma can happen at any point to any one of them," said Amy Maguire, alliance director. "They understand we have to have trauma centers, so the survey is powerful in and of itself."

Lee Memorial Health System is widely credited with bringing this issue to light from a statewide perspective, but it is the newly created alliance of trauma hospitals that has legislators mulling over at least six related bills in Tallahassee right now.

"When we first started having our discussions over trauma, I tried to explain this was a state and national issue, but a lot of people felt like they were only hearing it here," said Jim Nathan, Lee Memorial system president. "Now it has certainly caught the attention of a growing number of state legislators and we're hopeful they will try to work with us on the various solutions we have offered to them."

Four different bills deal in varying degrees with increased traffic fines and penalties to pay for trauma.

The main bill is patterned after Texas' recently passed legislation that increased fines for traffic citations, vehicle registrations and DUIs to raise at least \$250 million for trauma. In Florida, advocates are seeking \$126 million.

Another bill this year looks to change an existing state statute that allows counties of 800,000 or more to seek fractions of a sales tax increase to fund trauma services.

At the minimum, Lee Memorial officials hope legislators will amend the special trauma district created by lawmakers last May by giving it taxing authority.

Lee Memorial's government relations consultant, Keith Arnold, said he's confident something will happen this session to support trauma - either statewide or locally.

He said at least 35 lawmakers have cosponsored various bills supporting the trauma system - that's one-third of the legislative body.

"There's this huge, widespread support to maintain the trauma network in Florida," Arnold said. "It's a real crisis and legislators understand that now. Where we are today to where we were two years ago politically speaking is light-years apart."

Alliance officials point out that when legislators created Florida's trauma system in 1982, they left out a way to pay for it.

Since then, 30 out of the original 50 trauma centers have closed across the state. Today, at least a half-dozen trauma centers across the state are in danger of closing because of money.

"Trauma centers are phenomenally expensive to maintain and they don't pay for themselves - they never have and they never will," Arnold said. "The reality is, we're close to losing a half-dozen or more of them in the next year if something doesn't happen positively in Tallahassee."

SURVEY RESULTS

On DUI/DWI fines: 66 percent of residents said they would very likely support an increase; 21 percent said they were somewhat likely.

On other moving violations fines: 51 percent of residents said they would very likely support an increase; 27 percent said they were somewhat likely.

On paying physicians: 42 percent of residents said they were very supportive of using increases in fines to pay for physicians staffing a **trauma center**; 37 percent said they would be somewhat supportive.