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Traffic tickets may be trauma centers' lifeblood

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Having a car accident in Pensacola instead of other Florida cities possibly could increase your chance of survival.

According to statistics, accident victims have a 20 percent better chance of survival if they are taken to a trauma center instead of an emergency room. Pensacola has three of the state's 21 trauma centers, which have more specialists available.

But Pensacola's trauma centers now are struggling for survival.

Members of the Alliance to Save Florida's Trauma Care -- including representatives of Baptist, Sacred Heart and West Florida health-care systems -- spoke to the Pensacola News Journal's Editorial Board recently to rally support for proposed state legislation that could alleviate their financial woes.

The proposed Anjelica and Victoria Velez Memorial Traffic Safety Act would increase the penalty for running through a red light to \$125. The extra \$65 would go toward funding the state's trauma care centers.

If passed, each trauma center could receive \$1 million a year in funding, said Alliance spokesman Todd Schimpf. On average, each hospital loses about \$5 million a year to maintain a trauma care center.

Other violations that the Alliance to Save Florida's Trauma Care plan to target include speeding, driving without insurance and driving without a seat belt.

"Auto accidents make up most of the trauma incidents in Florida," Schimpf said. "In the last 30 years, the state has lost 20 trauma centers. The ones we have remaining are dedicated to providing trauma care."

Even if the bill is passed, "it's just enough to keep us from bailing out," said Bob Murphy, an administrator at Baptist Hospital.

In 2003, the net loss was \$93 million for 18 of the then 20 Florida trauma centers. Only 18 centers reported data.

"Uncompensated trauma peaked after the hurricane," said Louis Perillo, senior vice president for medical affairs at West Florida Hospital. "No one is in this to make a killing."

William McLaughlin, president of Sacred Heart, said local hospitals one day might have to compromise their mission to provide health care to a community because they cannot afford to sustain the trauma care centers.

"Sacred Heart provides \$800,000 of funding just for physicians to stand by," McLaughlin said. "This is an unrecoverable cost."

Unlike emergency rooms, state requirements for the highest level trauma centers include having a general surgeon and an anesthesiology team on site 24 hours a day and for neurosurgeons, plastic surgeons and other specialized doctors to be available within 30 minutes. Trauma centers also are able to maximize the "golden hour" -- treatment rendered within the first hour after an injury occurs, which statistics show drastically increases the chance of survival.

"Baptist and Sacred Heart have helicopters that operate at a loss," McLaughlin said. "Just like the trauma center, we know it's the right thing to do, but can we afford it? We need something permanent (in our funding) so we can start making permanent plans."