

Trauma center to stay open - for now

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New neurosurgeons sign deals; \$6 million promised

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The **trauma center** lives - at least for another year.

The Lee County Trauma Services District board voted Thursday to withdraw a letter of intent to close Southwest Florida's only **trauma center** for a lack of neurosurgeons.

Buoyed by nearly \$6 million in promised cash next year and signed contracts with two newly trained neurosurgeons, Lee Memorial Health System's trauma board authorized the **trauma center** to rescind its closure notice to the state.

"Outside of the financial issue, the biggest threat to the **trauma center** was making sure we got the specialty resources we needed to take care of injured patients," trauma director Dr. Andrew Mikulaschek said. "We're not out of the woods yet, but it's very encouraging."

The **trauma center** fielded close to 1,000 trauma patients last year, up from 800 in 2002. A trauma patient - one who has sustained severe injuries resulting from such things as vehicle accidents - can rack up costs ranging from \$20,000 to \$40,000.

The **trauma center** was in dire straits in December when two out of the four neurosurgeons working there quit, nearly shutting down the center and sending hospital leaders scrambling for help.

Already struggling for money to help meet the \$10 million annual expense of running the state-designated center, Lee Memorial feared it might have to close it: Trauma officials gave six months' notice to the state.

Today, things are looking up.

A Broward neurosurgeon stepped in to help on weekends and Lee Memorial courted two neurosurgeons coming out of one of the nation's top training schools in Arizona.

Dr. Samen Javedan will start working in mid-July and a colleague, who has one year of training left, will begin next summer.

"These guys have spent seven and a half years training," said Dr. Chuck Krivenko, Lee Memorial's chief medical officer of clinical services. "They are exceptionally well-trained, highly skilled neurosurgeons and we are lucky to have them in Southwest Florida."

A third neurosurgeon is in negotiations and could start as early as January, and Mikulaschek is courting a sixth trauma surgeon to keep up with growth.

While permanent, stable funding for the **trauma center** has yet to be secured, Lee Memorial leaders are relieved their plight is making headway in Tallahassee.

Lawmakers this year have appropriated \$1 million each to all 20 of Florida's trauma centers, and the Lee trauma district is guaranteed nearly \$5 million next year from a state-federal Medicaid grant program.

"We're still very much pieced together financially," Lee Memorial board Chairwoman Linda Brown said. "But I think we can say the **trauma center** will not go away for lack of funds right now. We just raised awareness to the point where nobody could say no anymore."

Trauma officials also are hopeful a piece of legislation passes today that allows counties to request a quarter-cent trauma-only tax from voters.

Lee Memorial system President Jim Nathan said he wouldn't dream of asking voters to support the **trauma center** with a sales tax as long as state and federal governments are contributing \$6 million, but much of that money - the Medicaid

grant dollars - is not guaranteed beyond next year.

Current legislation also calls for a statewide study on trauma funding.

"Three times we were on the verge of being shut down over the last couple of years," Nathan said. "Instead, now we're in a position of focusing on really getting settled down and stabilizing the physicians."