

Health Care Cuts Don't Heal

By Ryan Beaty

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Of all the unprecedented challenges our Florida health care system faces, there is a new one that dwarfs all the others. Our governor is proposing \$2.1 billion in hospital Medicaid payment cuts that jeopardize our state health care system, threaten access to quality care for all Florida residents and put thousands of jobs at risk. These cuts may represent the most serious threats Citrus Memorial Health System, and other hospitals, in Florida have ever faced.

The Florida Hospital Association estimates that a \$2.1 billion cut is equal to 40,000 jobs in our state. As hospitals are forced to lay off staff, patients will face longer wait times, longer distances to intensive care, and dramatic cutbacks in services. We know this from experience: last year, \$500 million in Medicaid cuts put an estimated 1,000 jobs in jeopardy and led to a reduction in primary care clinics, OB/GYN services, skilled nursing units and outpatient chemotherapy services.

If his proposal is passed by the State Legislature, our already overcrowded emergency departments would overflow with patients who would have no other option to receive care. Cutting payments to hospitals does not reduce the cost of health care; it only shifts the burden of cost for care rendered. The costs associated with caring for patients without access to health care coverage doesn't go away. As hospitals are forced to shift the cost to those with private health insurance, this cut becomes a hidden tax on insurance premiums and small business owners.

Aside from the loss of thousands of jobs, our fragile Florida economy would be further weakened by the cuts. According to a University of Florida economic impact report, approximately \$4.8 billion will be slashed from the state's economy. For every dollar spent on health care jobs in Florida \$2.84 is generated in positive economic impact; take away \$2.1 billion and our economy will be shaken to its core, as the multiplier effect works in reverse.

He also argues that these cuts protect Florida's taxpayers. But, which taxpayers?

- Certainly not taxpayers whose living depends on the state's economy, which will be further weakened by these cuts.
- Certainly not the nearly 40,000 taxpayers who could lose their jobs because of the cuts.
- Certainly not the small business owners and their employees whose health insurance premiums will rise as the costs of treating the poor are shifted on to those with private health insurance.

The fact of the matter is we are all losers if the governor's proposal passes. Whether it is in the form of longer wait times, fewer health care services, less access to cutting-edge treatments, thousands of jobs lost and billions of dollars stripped from our economy, everyone will lose.

This proposal is not only damaging but inefficient as well, cutting \$2.1 billion to only save \$422 million in general revenue. If there are any winners, it would be the Federal Government, who will keep \$1.2 billion in matching funds we currently receive for our Medicaid program.

Citrus Memorial Health System will do our best to protect our staff and preserve the quality care we deliver to the 200,000 patients we see every year. While we cannot predict precisely what would happen if those cuts are adopted, we do know that, given the size and severity of these cuts, it is clear that no one would escape unscathed.

To fight this draconian proposal, our hospital has joined a newly formed coalition called "Heal Florida's Health Care." The goal of this coalition is to put a face and give a voice to every Floridian who would be impacted by these devastating cuts. I encourage all citizens of our state to join today.

We must win this battle. With millions of Floridians depending on us for vital health care services, the stakes have never been higher.

Ryan Beaty is the president and chief executive officer of Citrus Memorial Health System.

For more information on the Heal Florida's Health Care coalition visit www.healflhealthcare.com.