



House Moves to Patch up Trauma Divisions

After nearly three years of legal battling in the hospital industry, the Florida House on Friday approved a bill that would ensure three disputed trauma centers keep their doors open.

But the trauma centers at Blake Medical Center in Manatee County, Regional Medical Center Bayonet Point in Pasco County and Ocala Regional Medical Center in Marion County still face uncertainty because the House and Senate need to reach agreement on a final bill before the legislative session ends next Friday.

The House and Senate largely agree on the trauma issue. But the House has wrapped the issue in a massive health-care bill that deals with controversial ideas such as allowing nurse practitioners to provide care without physician supervision.

House members voted 74-42 to approve the bill, which critics derided as a legislative "train" that cobbles together tangentially related issues.

"Say no to the choo-choo," Rep. Katie Edwards, D-Plantation, implored other members before the vote.

The Senate on Monday is scheduled to take up its trauma proposal (SB 1276), which does not have the other issues in the House bill. Regardless of the wrangling that might take place during the next week about the bills, Rep. Mia Jones, D-Jacksonville, said lawmakers have a responsibility to resolve the trauma issue.

"We know that it has been a food fight that has been very ugly," said Jones, who supported the House bill.

The trauma issue comes after nearly three years of litigation that has focused largely on whether the Florida Department of Health improperly allowed the Manatee County, Pasco County and Marion County trauma centers to open --- and whether the facilities should remain open.

The three trauma centers are part of the HCA health-care chain and have faced challenges from Tampa General Hospital, Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg, St. Joseph's Hospital in Tampa and UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville, all of which have long operated trauma facilities.

Though some details in the bills are different, the House and Senate both would allow the three trauma centers to remain open. Also, they would place a moratorium on approvals of new trauma centers, possibly until July 1, 2015. The Department of Health is trying to move forward with new administrative rules for approving trauma centers, though that proposal also has been challenged legally.

The Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida, which includes public and teaching hospitals that operate trauma facilities, battled the trauma bills throughout much of the legislative session.

But the House bill seeks to address at least two of the safety-net alliance's concerns, including allaying a concern that the measure could allow a closed trauma center at Orange Park Medical Center in Clay County

to reopen. Orange Park Medical Center, another HCA hospital, opened a trauma center in 2011 but the facility was later shut down for reasons unrelated to the legal battling.

The bill also addresses arguments by the safety-net alliance that Ocala Regional's trauma center has only been allowed to operate under what is known as "provisional" status. That is not a permanent status. The bill would effectively require Ocala Regional to achieve that permanent status, known as having a "verified" trauma center, by the end of the year or face the possibility of closing the facility.

Safety-net alliance spokesman Ron Bartlett said his group's members are "cautiously optimistic" that the legislation would help lead to renewed negotiations with the Department of Health about a rule for trauma-facility approvals.

"Safety net hospitals have always supported a statewide trauma system that gives all Floridians timely access to high-quality, life-saving care when they need it," Bartlett said in a prepared statement. "The amended legislation passed by the House today is a step forward that addresses our chief concerns with earlier bills and allows our hospitals to focus resources on patient care instead of the courtroom."

As lawmakers get ready to enter the frenzied final week of the session, however, it remains unclear how the House and Senate will deal with the trauma issue --- particularly if it remains tangled with all of the other issues in the House bill.

Supporters say the House bill includes issues that will improve access to primary care for patients. That includes expanding the powers of nurse practitioners and trying to boost the use of telemedicine.

"This is access to good primary care," Rep. Cary Pigman, R-Avon Park, said while discussing the nurse-practitioner issue. "We need good primary care."

But critics contend that proposals such as the nurse-practitioner issue threaten quality of care.

"The basic tenet is, do no harm," Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart, said. "This is the massive bill of harm."