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### Hospitals: Better to cut than to close

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No one misses a service until it is about to be eliminated, and such is the case at the Jersey City Medical Center, which has filed an application with the state to close its pediatric intensive care unit.

It is a move that's been promised since April by hospital officials, who have been trying to pare expenses to cut down on financial losses at many hospitals in the state. Hospital officials said that closing down the six-bed pediatric unit could save the hospital millions of dollars.

In July, the hospital ended its pediatric residency program in the unit, and officials announced that the five doctors who were teaching the residents would be let go.

LibertyHealth Board Chairman Brett Harwood told The Jersey Journal that steps were taken "proactively, anticipating financial shortfalls and not wanting to have to make serious changes under crisis circumstances forced upon us by others."

He was referring to recommendations expected from a governor's commission on the state's health care resources.

With so many hospitals in the state facing fiscal disaster, the state is looking to eliminate some medical facilities, arguing that there are some hospitals and other institutions in a region that offer redundant services.

The LibertyHealth decisions are based on an eight-month evaluation of community needs, directed by the state Department of Health and Senior Services, with the help of Chicago-based consultant Wellspring Partners.

The "certificate of need" application filed by the Jersey City hospital is supported by the fact that 75 percent of all pediatric intensive care cases in the county in 2004 and 2005 received care outside Hudson County.

It may be a bit extreme for Ward F Councilwoman Viola Richardson to declare, "Children will now die by the time they get to where they are going."

With Bayonne Medical Center's woes, more babies are being born at the Jersey City Medical Center. Its neonatal facilities are heavily utilized, and once the babies leave the hospital, they are not expected back. Outpatient care through clinics is available and the emergency room will stabilize seriously injured or ill children - before sending them for more specialized care elsewhere.

Health care is changing. This is just one example. A public hearing on the closure of the pediatric unit is scheduled for a week from tomorrow in Trenton.

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