

The Palm Beach Post

Point of View: Don't cut our capacity to care for children

Opinion Editorial by Daniel Armstrong, Ph.D.

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While COVID-19 has brought health to the forefront of our day-to-day lives, for parents, it's always been a priority. That's why, when their children are sick or injured, they'll search high and low to find the best treatment and the highest quality of care, often turning to one of the 15 renowned member hospitals that belong to the Florida Association of Children's Hospitals (FACH).

FACH members, such as Palm Beach Children's Hospital at St. Mary's Medical Center, provide nearly 60% of all inpatient hospital stays for children 17 and younger. They operate 75% of pediatric transplant programs and 80% of pediatric open-heart surgery programs in the state.

Most also operate a Level I, Level II or pediatric trauma center, and several are considered major teaching hospitals, recognized for providing hands-on training for future generations of pediatric nurses, doctors, and surgeons.

Like most hospitals during the pandemic, Florida's children's hospitals experienced significant revenue losses as elective procedures were canceled or delayed and costs rose for changes to service delivery (telehealth, for example). Even as they stepped up to support adult providers and offset the mounting demand for care, they were seriously struggling.

Now, they are facing Florida House and Senate budget cuts from a reduction in base rates and the elimination of hospitals' critical care funds. Protections were provided for several specialty-licensed or freestanding children's hospitals, but the majority of children's hospitals that exist within larger health systems will face substantial and unreasonably large drop-offs in inpatient and outpatient funding.

Although they're only 15 of the 224 acute care hospitals in the state, these children's hospitals are targeted to bear over half of the cuts to children's health care in the Senate's budget and nearly 75% in the House proposal. Additionally, more than 80% of the reductions in critical care funds will be imposed on 76% of Florida's children's hospitals.

We urge lawmakers to recognize that there are both stand-alone and embedded children's hospitals in Florida, and all of them offer the specialty care that only children's hospitals can provide. When budget decisions disproportionately affect a subset of the children's hospitals, the adverse impact will be felt across the state, perhaps permanently damaging the pediatric safety net that has been built over decades of tireless work, and potentially leading to greater health risks and poor outcomes for millions of children.

We're committed to serving Florida's children by giving them second chances and new beginnings — just like we did before and every day throughout the pandemic. But we cannot continue to do this without adequate resources and an appropriate level of support. Please don't cut our capacity to care.

Daniel Armstrong, Ph.D., is president of the Florida Association of Children's Hospitals., *a group of the state's 15 children's hospitals and the voice for children's health care issues in Florida. He also is professor and executive vice chair of Pediatrics and director of the Mailman Center for Child Development at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.*

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