

Citing dearth of births, delivery unit will close

Lakeside will limit its maternity services to prenatal, midwife care

Valentina Palm Palm Beach Post | USA TODAY NETWORK

BELLE GLADE – Lakeside Medical Center, Palm Beach County's only public hospital, is shutting down its baby-delivery unit citing a drop in births in recent years. The closure leaves expectant mothers in the far western communities of the county almost 30 miles away from the nearest full-service maternity wards.

The hospital will keep its maternity department open with physicians offering prenatal and midwife coverage and will have an obstetrician-gynecologist on call for emergency deliveries, according to hospital



Lakeside Medical Center in Belle Glade is closing its baby-delivery unit. ALLEN EYESTONE/PALM BEACH POST FILE

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officials.

The decision is expected to shift births to other hospitals such as Palms West Hospital and Wellington Regional Medical Center in western Palm Beach County.

"If in maternity care, the volume and the patients are not coming to us, what is it that we can do?" said Dr. Jennifer Dorcé-Medard, Lakeside's associate chief medical officer. "Offering prenatal care is an area that we can definitely help serve the patients, so we can work alongside other higher level of care facilities to deliver healthy babies."

The delivery unit will remain open until an official closing date is announced.

Lakeside Medical Center, on Hooker Highway between Belle Glade and Pahokee, opened its doors in 2009 and delivered its first baby that year. The hospital serves the rural communities near Lake Okeechobee, where about 40,000 people live and most of the population is middle- to low-income.

Dorcé-Medard says deliveries at Lakeside have declined over the past seven years. In 2018, the unit delivered 350 babies. Last year, it delivered 111 babies and 120 babies are projected to be born there in 2022.

"In January 2022, we had eight deliveries, so that's pretty low," Dorcé-Medard said.

As the number of births decrease, the unit loses proficiency, Dorcé-Medard says.

"For someone who's not in the medical field, they may feel a lower number may mean that you have more attention to that baby," she said. "But you want to make sure you're sharp and you're keeping up with your skills."

She attributes the decline to mothers already choosing to have their babies in hospitals to the east, including Palms West Hospital and Wellington Regional Medical Center, which offer higher levels of care.

Steve B. Wilson, Belle Glade's mayor, doubts the closure will affect the community.

"Most of those deliveries are on the east coast, anyway," said Wilson, who defines the coast as east of Twenty-Mile Bend. "We want people to be both in The Glades, but we respect the will of the public."

Lakeside's labor unit has six delivery and 10 postpartum rooms and employs a staff of 12. Dorcé-Medard said all employees will be transferred to other units of the hospital and offered training they need to do those jobs.

"It will be their choice if there's an area in the hospital they're interested in," Dorcé-Medard said. "Our goal is to keep our staff."

Moving forward, the hospital's maternity ward will focus on prenatal services offering 24/7 midwife coverage. It will hire an obstetrician-gynecologist to the unit and have another on call for emergency deliveries.

"The focus of this district is ... filling in the gap and answering the needs of the community," said Dorcé-Medard, adding the ward have seen a spike in patients lacking prenatal care.

"If we can offer them prenatal care services... it will complement the services at other facilities and ensures safe delivery wherever they choose to give birth," she said.

Lakeside will drive most expectant mothers to their hospital of choice for their delivery, using one of two ambulances the county's Health Care District purchased for emergency and non-emergency transfers.

Like any other ambulance transfer, the cost will be billed to the patient's insurance. If a mother-to-be is uninsured, the district will work with them to see if they qualify for financial assistance, Dorcé-Medard said.

Palms West Hospital in Royal Palm Beach is expected to become the delivery center of choice for many of those mothers, and James Kimbrell, its chief executive, said this week that the hospital is ready to absorb the influx.

"This is not going to overwhelm our system," said Kimbrell. "It just adds more value to our investment in our maternity ward."

For the last three years, the hospital's maternity ward has seen an increase in moms giving birth, Kimbrell said. Last year it delivered 2,350 babies, an average of nearly six per day. He said it has added four post-partum beds, for a total of 16, and hired a maternal medicine fetal doctor who will work closely with doctors in Lakeside.

For Wilson, his biggest concern is that mothers from the western communities receive the best medical attention during labor, wherever they go in the county.

"We are going to ensure those young ladies still have the support and care to have the deliveries," Wilson said. "It's unfortunate that won't be at Lakeside."