

Stand-alone emergency rooms emerge in Central Florida



Two stand-alone emergency departments have opened in Central Florida in the past year and two more are planned to open in the next year. (Breen, David, Osceola Regional Medical Center)

By Scott Powers, Orlando Sentinel

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When the Hunter's Creek Emergency Room opened on John Young Parkway in June, the people of that burgeoning community suddenly had a center that could treat medical emergencies ranging from heart attacks to broken bones.

The off-site hospital emergency department was the second such facility to open in Central Florida in the past year, and two more will open in the next year or so. That puts Orlando in the forefront of a trend of full-service emergency medicine facilities rising miles from hospitals.

The first such ER opened in Florida just 12 years ago. There now are 14 statewide, not including the two new ones coming to Central Florida.

Most of them, including Osceola Regional's Hunter's Creek ER, at 12100 S. John Young Parkway, and Central Florida Regional Hospital's Oviedo ER, at 8300 Red Bug Lake Road., which opened last November, and the Florida Hospital facility in Winter Garden, which will open in 2015, are branches of hospitals that are looking to plant their flags in growing, new communities.

"We looked at our stats and demographics. It was very clear that a significant portion of our patient population was coming from here in Hunter's Creek," Dr. Craig Mitchell, associate director of Osceola

Regional emergency medicine, said in June when that facility opened. "And in order to capture that more effectively, and serve the area better, it made sense to look at putting in a free-standing emergency department here."

HCA, which owns both the Osceola Regional and Central Florida Regional facilities, has approval to use the Oviedo emergency room as a first phase toward development of a full-service hospital next door, to be called the Oviedo Medical Center.

Florida Hospital also is planning a full hospital eventually at the site of its emergency room, which broke ground last month State Road 535 and Daniels Road across from Winter Garden Village at Fowlers Grove. HCA has not ruled out the prospect of a Hunter's Creek hospital but has announced no plans yet.

The GuideWell Emergency Medicine Doctors emergency room will open at 113 N. Orlando Ave. in Winter Park later this year, with the expectation that the area is underserved enough to host a profitable, independent emergency medicine practice. GuideWell is a sister company of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida.

All the stand-alone emergency rooms are staffed 24 hours with board-certified emergency room doctors and full staffs. All have a dozen or more examination rooms, imaging equipment, labs and other facilities to handle nearly all emergency medical issues that could be handled by most hospital emergency rooms.

They also offer ambulance and even helicopter transportation to hospitals for patients that need hospital care.

Paul B. Ginsburg, a professor of medicine and public policy at the University of Southern California's Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics, said those transfers to in-patient rooms are valuable revenue pathways for the hospitals.

"It's part of a broader strategy for hospitals to be where the patients are," Ginsburg said. "A very high proportion of medical admissions to a hospital come through its emergency room."

Florida Hospital's Winter Garden facility also will have other health care services and is called Florida Hospital Winter Garden, not an emergency room. Among the other services: 23-hour "observation" beds, which allow non-hospital admissions for patients who need to be monitored overnight.

"Our goal, unlike some of the other free-standing emergency departments we've studied around the country that are more of a pack-and-ship, or treat-and-street, our goal is to keep as many options for patients there as we can," said Amanda Maggard, administrator of Florida Hospital Winter Garden. "We really are viewing it more as a health campus, to bring more comprehensive health services to the community."

Yet stand-alone emergency rooms also share something else with hospital ERs: steeper prices. Typically, patients pay co-pays of about twice as much for an emergency room visit as they would for visits to doctors offices or urgent care centers, which also are often staffed around the clock to handle non-emergency medical problems.

In addition, emergency rooms may charge "facility fees" that cover the costs of expensive equipment and staffing necessary for major emergencies, but perhaps not needed for more routine patient problems such as stitches or broken bones. Those facility fees are usually, but not necessarily, paid by insurance plans, and can run hundreds of dollars per visit.

Typically, nationally, stand-alone emergency departments are low-traffic, high-revenue enterprises. Neither Osceola Regional nor Central Florida Regional would consent to interviews last week to discuss the businesses.

That leaves some health care industry professionals cautioning that patients should not mistake stand-alone emergency rooms as the place to go for non-emergencies.

"If somebody goes to one of these free-standing emergency room facilities, and they don't need the caliber of care that is part of that facility, they are paying more than they have to," said Alan Ayers, who is on the board of director of the Urgent Care Association.

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