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Commentary: VU, other trauma centers want state to help pay for care of uninsured

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Tennessee's six Level 1 trauma centers, including Vanderbilt University Medical Center's, are asking lawmakers for tens of millions of dollars a year to help cover the cost of care to the uninsured.

Hospitals everywhere complain about the growing cost of treating patients who can't afford to pay, but these aren't ordinary hospitals.

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According to the Tennessee Trauma Alliance, the state's six Level 1 trauma centers provided \$37.6 million worth of uncompensated care in 2005. Last year's totals are still being tallied.

Vandy says its uncompensated trauma-care costs were \$6.4 million in 2005 but skyrocketed to \$17.6 million in 2006, partly because of cuts to TennCare, the state's health program for the poor and uninsured.

Some people were dropped from the program, and others who might have qualified for benefits because of their injuries were no longer eligible to enroll in the program, Vandy spokesman John Howser said.

Tennessee's other Level 1 trauma centers are Johnson City Medical Center, the University of Tennessee Medical Center in Knoxville, Holston Valley Medical Center in Kingsport, Erlanger Health System's Baroness Campus in Chattanooga and the Regional Medical Center at Memphis, also known as The Med.

Some of these hospitals belong to the Tennessee Public and Teaching Hospital Association, and that group has hired Nashville lobbyist Anne Carr to lobby for more state money to help offset their losses.

"If we could get a \$30 million source of recurring funding, we'd be thrilled," Carr said. "It wouldn't cover all of the problem, but it would be a substantial improvement."

Burchett introduces bill

Last week, Sen. Tim Burchett, R-Knoxville, introduced a bill calling for a "trauma center fund," but "it's kind of a shell bill," Carr said. The bill is sketchy because "we don't know what our funding mechanism will be," she said.

Previous efforts to secure special funding for trauma centers went nowhere, but it's important to keep trying, said Julie Dunn, who leads the state Trauma Care Advisory Council.

"We have to begin now to look for some common sense, long-term funding mechanism to ensure our trauma system remains in place," she said.

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