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Lakeland Health revives plans for behavioral wellness facility after pausing due to Covid-19

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After being on hold since the start of the Covid pandemic in Florida, planning for Lakeland Regional Health's new behavioral health facility is back on track.

In November 2019, the city of Lakeland and Lakeland Regional Health announced a \$46 million investment for a new facility to meet those demands in behavioral health needs. However, the project was temporarily put on ice due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This month, the hospital's board of directors unanimously voted to revisit the Center for Behavioral Health and Wellness project and continue it.

Groundbreaking for the 80,000-square-foot facility is now scheduled for October with a summer 2022 completion date. It was previously expected to be complete by 2021. The decision to move ahead comes as Polk County's number of new Covid-19 cases has started to drop.

"With the pause, we had time to go back and make minor adjustments to the design of care for patients," Deana Nelson, senior vice president of administration and corporate priorities, told the Tampa Bay Business Journal, adding that administration took the Covid pandemic into consideration.



LAKELAND REGIONAL HEALTH

Rendering of the outside courtyard for the new behavioral health building

When the hospital decided to pause the project, the design and planning phase were complete and workers were preparing to break ground.

"We didn't have to add rooms or more space, but we looked at the design of air flow and keeping patients isolated," she said, explaining patients with mental illness may have other illnesses such as Covid-19.

"The reaction [when the hospital decided to pause it] was disappointment, but everyone clearly recognized it was the responsible thing to do while dealing with Covid. What's so exciting about this is we have a team of psychologists, and now in conjunction we will have a top-notch facility," she said.

This was the only major project the hospital put on hold.

The 96-bed behavioral health hospital for adolescents and adults will allow for expanded care and co-location of inpatient and outpatient behavioral health services.

The hospital will relocate its outpatient child, adolescent and adult behavioral health services from the Harden Boulevard site to its main campus once the facility is completed. The site is roughly 5 miles from the main campus.

"About 25 percent of Lakeland's population is affected by mental health issues or substance abuse every year, and many of them end up in the emergency room, on the streets or incarcerated," according to the hospital.

Currently, Lakeland Regional Health Medical Center has 68 beds for adult and adolescent behavioral health care, including depression, substance abuse and memory disorders, and serves as a Baker Act receiving hospital. However, there isn't an outside area where patients can enjoy calming nature scenes and be outdoors, which the new facility will provide.

The hospital will continue to see patients as the facility is being built. In 2019, Lakeland Regional Health cared for more than 5,500 Baker Act cases and the number of patients needing care is increasing partially as a result of Covid-related stress.

"Our outpatient patient count has really skyrocketed and it's because when you look at national trends, there are more suicide attempts, overdosing and people

who are needing coping techniques now because of stress around Covid and health concerns," Director of Behavioral Health Alice Nuttall told the Business Journal.

The Center for Behavioral Health and Wellness will focus on:

Emergency stabilization

Adult inpatient care

Substance abuse disorders

Memory disorders

Child and adolescent inpatient services

Adult outpatient care

Child and adolescent outpatient care

Family behavioral health and wellness

Non-residential intensive behavioral health programs

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