

NEONATAL AND MATERNAL CARE

NCH Healthcare looking to future

Upgrading will help more high-risk newborns, moms

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Eileen Bode was not allowed to hold her newborn son.

He was whisked away to the neonatal intensive care unit minutes after he was born at NCH North Naples Hospital.

A sharp-eyed nurse in the delivery room noticed the newborn, who was born full term weighing 7 pounds, 9 ounces, wasn't breathing well. There was a slight purplish hue to his skin.

That was 10 years ago when Bode's son, William, spent two weeks in the neonatal intensive care unit for a lung infection. He needed antibiotics and a ventilator to help him breathe. He is healthy today.

Some details of that tumultuous period have faded from memory for Bode, 39, and her husband, John Bode, 47. But the Naples couple remains grateful the neonatal unit is minutes from their home.

The nonprofit NCH Healthcare System, which owns the North Naples hospital with the only hospital-based birth center in Collier County, is upgrading services for women and children over the next five years so more families can receive care where they live, according to NCH.

"Like most things in life, you never think you are going to need it. But the day you do, you are going to want it right there," Eileen Bode said. "You never know."

Collier's birth rate has declined in recent years, following a national trend blamed in part on the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. NCH recognizes that births

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Will Bode, 9, talks with his mother, Eileen Bode, 39, on Wednesday at their home in North Naples.

JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

"We have a year to do this, but I am hoping for sooner. You have to prove you can get to that level." Dr. Michel Saaloukeh, neonatologist with Kidz Medical Services



Will Bode, 9, plays catch with his older brother Jackson Bode, 13, Wednesday at their home in North Naples. PHOTOS BY JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS USA TODAY

NCH

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are down but could turn around as the region's population continues to grow, said Paula DiGrigoli, executive director of the NCH Safe & Healthy Children's Coalition in Collier County.

Collier's birth rate was 8 births per 1,000 residents in 2019, the last year for which the most complete data was available, compared to 14 births per 1,000 in 2006, according to the Florida Department of Health.

One of NCH's projects already underway is getting licensed to care for more premature or ill newborns than what the North Naples hospital can treat now, so fewer babies need transferring to hospitals out of town for the more specialized care they require.

Other improvements will involve expanding fetal maternal medicine for high-risk pregnancies, adding more pediatric surgery and providing behavioral mental health counselors in the pediatric emergency room.

NCH receives a nearly \$6 million gift

The upgrades are being funded in part by a \$5.7 million gift from the Bill and Julia Van Domelen Foundation, headquartered in Kalamazoo, Michigan, NCH announced last month.

The foundation's director, Julia Van Domelen, has ties in the community and has contributed to other local organizations that serve families.

Besides helping NCH expand services for women and children, the gift will help improve collaborations with other local entities to ensure healthcare access in the community is the No. 1 priority, Paul Hiltz, president and chief executive officer of NCH, said in a news release.

Officials at the publicly operated Lee Health System in Lee County, which operates Golisano Children's Hospital south of Fort Myers with a 70-bed neonatal intensive care unit, said it is important to have quality care close to home, especially when it comes to children.

Lee Health officials applaud NCH's plans, even if it means losing some infants who would otherwise be transferred to Golisano from Collier.

Golisano operates a level-three neonatal care, the specialized service level that NCH is seeking for its program. The Golisano neonatal unit cared for 950 premature or seriously ill babies last year, seven of whom were transferred from Collier, according to Lee Health.

"We are happy to hear that NCH is elevating the services it offers in its (neonatal intensive care unit), and we will continue to collaborate with them to ensure that all babies born in our region receive the best possible care in the most appropriate setting for their individual needs," Dr. Larry Antonucci, president and chief executive officer of Lee Health, said in a statement.

The two hospital systems historically competed for patients, including for de-



Jackson Bode, 13, left, spends time with his brother, Will Bode, 9, Wednesday at their home in North Naples.

liveries, from the southern Lee communities of Bonita Springs and Estero, but that has abated since Hiltz took the reins of NCH in fall 2019.

Caring for smaller babies

NCH is working on upgrading its 18-bed neonatal intensive care unit from a level two to a level three so it can care for premature infants under 2.2 pounds, said Dr. Michel Saaloukeh, a neonatologist with Kidz Medical Services, the practice that provides specialists for the unit.

The neonatal unit is currently limited to caring for premature babies above that weight.

About 3,300 to 3,500 babies are delivered annually at NCH North Naples, and on average 10% need specialized care in a neonatal unit, Saaloukeh said. NCH usually transfers about 10% of its newborns to another hospital that has a level-three unit, he said. In the last year, 29 newborns were sent out, and most went to Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami.

The plan is to cut the number of transfers in half once NCH's unit becomes a level-three program so the infants can stay close to home, he said.

Some babies who are born full weight with heart conditions or other abnormalities will still be transferred because of the highly specialized care they need.

NCH will submit an application to state regulators for the license upgrade, and the unit will stay at 18 beds. What's required is demonstrating that staff can perform the care standards of the level-three unit, Saaloukeh said.

That means advancing the skills of the nursing staff and others in the unit. Critical care nurses will need to learn, for example, how to intubate smaller premature babies.

"We have a year to do this, but I am hoping for sooner," he said. "You have to prove you can get to that level. You have to do the stuff to show you can do it. We

need to optimize what we do, and the most critical step is education."

NCH also wants to expand pediatric surgery and anesthesiology as well as imaging and have a pediatric operating room, DiGrigoli said. NCH will decide in about six months when to start that project.

"It will take a year to build that," she said.

More help for high-risk pregnancies

Another project will involve expanding fetal maternal medicine to keep more expectant mothers with high-risk pregnancies at North Naples for delivery. Many local obstetricians send their high-risk pregnant patients to other hospitals with advanced fetal maternal medicine programs, Saaloukeh said. The goal is to give them the option of

staying in Naples.

Dr. Thomas Beckett, chairman of NCH's department of obstetrics and gynecology, welcomes what's coming.

He's excited for the hospital's birth center to have 24/7 coverage with contracted obstetricians for patients who come in but don't have their own obstetrician.

The contracted physicians, called "laborists," have become an industry trend similar to hospitalists, or physicians who work only in hospitals, Beckett said.

The 24/7 coverage will pave the way for North Naples to have an obstetrics emergency department that will be a boost to local families and to expectant mothers who visit the area and face an unexpected medical event, he said.

"This will be good. It will provide for better care and safer care," he said. "It's a big win."



Pediatric ER Medical Director Dr. Pia Myers takes 3-year-old Aubrie Spagnola for a ride in a children's buggy in a new pediatric emergency room at NCH North Naples Hospital on March 9, 2016, in North Naples. DAVID ALBERS/STAFF