

ECONOMY IN CRISIS

Fla. hospitals' hiring strong It grew even as the recession pared jobs in most other sectors.

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Employment at Florida hospitals grew by 4.3 percent from 2007 to 2009, even while employers in most industries were cutting workers, according to a report released Monday.

The University of Florida study, commissioned by the Florida Hospital Association, offers more evidence that health care is a recessionproof corner of the economy. Florida hospitals added about 10,000 employees and increased payrolls by \$844 million from 2007 to 2009.

Hospitals employed 13,844 full-time equivalent workers in Palm Beach County and 243,637 statewide in 2009.

"Thank goodness there's been a health care sector in Florida, because it's one of the few sectors that have remained relatively strong through the recession," said Bruce Rueben, president of the Florida Hospital Association.

However, Rueben said hospitals aren't quite recession-proof. During the depths of the downturn, hospitals saw patients put off treatment because they had lost jobs and health insurance.

"Much of health care is not elective, so you can only put it off for so long," Rueben said.

The reality that people get sick whether they can afford it or not, along with the aging of Florida's population, make hospitals more resilient than many industries.

One way to crunch the numbers: Palm Beach County's 19 hospitals employed 2.5 percent of the people working in the county in December 2009. Statewide, hospitals accounted for 3 percent of Florida's 8.1 million jobs.

Palm Beach County hospitals paid \$814 million in salaries in 2009, making the average pay \$58,798, not including benefits. Statewide, 285 hospitals paid \$13.3 billion in salaries, the study said.

In Martin County, hospitals employed 1,954 people at an average salary of \$54,278. And in St. Lucie County, 1,754 hospital workers made an average of \$57,013.

The study included such large hospitals as JFK Medical Center in Atlantis and St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach and smaller institutions like A.G. Holley State Hospital in Lantana and Oakwood Center of the Palm Beaches, a psychiatric hospital in West Palm Beach.

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