

New choice coming to Polk for medically fragile children

By Robin Williams Adams

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LAKELAND — Medically fragile children, dependent on technology like tube feeding or in need of specialized nursing, spend a lot of time in the hospital or on home health care.

Often parents quit work and stay home with them because children with complex health problems aren't welcome in most day-care programs.

But another choice — prescribed pediatric extended care — will be available in Polk County soon.

Pediatric Health Choice expects to open a medical day-health center in North Lakeland by mid-November. Staffed by nurses, therapists, nursing assistants and others, the center will be open Monday through Friday for up to 12 hours a day.

It can provide prescribed medical treatment in an atmosphere that's less institutional than a hospital, said Deborah Frazee, vice president for clinical services.

"We start their IV. We put a backpack on them and they're off and running," she said. "They're not tied to an IV pole."

Without centers like this, she said, some children would stay in the hospital longer. Or their days could become a constant series of trips to various specialists.

"We want to consolidate their medical intervention, their treatments, their therapies," Frazee said.

For some children, day health is an opportunity to see other children, something their medical problems now limit. For parents, it can be a chance to return to work, receive some training and restore the balance in their families.

"When you have a medically complex child you're dealing with, this is quite a load for any family," said Charlotte Brooks, director of nursing for Children's Medical Services in Polk County.

"This will allow families time to get other things done, as a family, and know their child is safe," she said.

Children can attend daily or come periodically for short-term therapy like intravenous treatments. Older children might come after school.

The new center, at 3131 Lakeland Hills Blvd., will be Pediatric Health Choice's fifth. Others are in St. Petersburg, Orlando, Miami and Tampa, where the for-profit company has its headquarters.

These centers and others like them developed in response to technology's



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increasing ability to keep children alive, at a time when insurance companies want less-expensive alternatives to long hospital stays.

Cathy Wooley-Brown, the administrator in charge of school-system programs for handicapped children, already knows preschoolers she believes would benefit.

Among them are a girl with a rare

skin disease that causes painful blisters on her skin and another who needs organ transplants.

"This would be a good way to transition these kids to where they can be with other kids," she said.

The center can treat children from birth to age 21, Frazee said, although she expects most of the first patients will

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be below school age.

Medicaid and some private insurance will cover children's care at the center, if prescribed by a doctor for appropriate reasons, Fraze said.

Appropriate reasons would be therapy, nursing care and/or medical technology, which could include apnea (temporary stopping of breathing) monitoring if an infant also needed other nursing, Fraze said.

The center isn't glorified day care for kids with sniffles.

But a child's health problem doesn't have to be permanent. Many will come for short-term treatments, such as burn care and antibiotic therapy, Fraze said.

The center will do parent training, helping parents feel better prepared to handle some of their children's complex needs.

"Our mission is to have the families and children become independent of us," Fraze said.