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# Saint Francis is more than a hospital, it's a healthcare beacon | Opinion

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Jennifer Williams, a candidate for Trenton's North Ward City Council has strong family ties to St. Francis and warns that its closure will hurt the community at large.

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By Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

By Jennifer Williams

Just like most Trentonians, I was blindsided by the news that Saint Francis Medical Center will be closing as it will be sold to Capital Health System in the coming months. The idea that our city's only religiously-affiliated hospital, which has served its community so well — is heartbreaking.

Saint Francis is more than a hospital; it is a Trenton landmark and has long been a beacon for Trentonians in providing necessary healthcare from emergency room services to clinic outreach to blood drives. As a matter of fact, I will be donating blood at what may be one of the last blood drives ever at Saint Francis. As I do, I am sure I will be thinking of what Saint Francis was throughout my lifetime as a Trentonian.

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I was born in this special hospital, as was my brother whom the doctors, nurses and nuns saved in the early 1960s when he was born quite prematurely. Frankly, as I often told, my older brother was born so small he could fit in a shoe box with room for the shoes left over. Saint Francis provided the medical miracle that gave my parents their sixth child and a person who is now a college professor in Texas. Surely, there are many other miracle babies (and adults) alive today because a Catholic hospital existed at Hamilton Avenue and Chambers Street.

By the time I was born and growing up in the shadow of the hospital, my mother got to fulfill her dream of working in the medical profession by studying to become a nurse's aide. Her first and only job would be at Saint Francis, just a few blocks from our home. My mother worked as a nurse's aide on the overnight shift for over 20 years and I grew up with St. Francis as our hospital for everything. Accidents, illnesses, childbirth — you name it, Saint Francis was where everyone I knew went for medical treatment, especially when a medical condition or injury was serious.

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If Saint Francis is allowed to close, it will have a devastating effect on Trenton on so many levels. The already too-high levels of medical care disparities in Trenton will only get worse when our city of 83,000 people will only have one hospital — Helene Fuld on Brunswick Avenue.

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As we saw during the pandemic, our fellow Trentonians and Hamilton neighbors who are African American or Latino do not have easy access to preventive medicine or treatment for already established ailments or conditions. This situation has not changed as Covid-19 has receded. Will the new owners of Saint Francis Hospital be able to improve that situation without a hospital on the eastern side of our city?

It was already bad enough for Trenton when the Mercer Medical Hospital on Bellevue Avenue was closed with promises of keeping a maternity ward and an excellent Montessori community daycare open. Unfortunately, and devastatingly, both of those promises were not kept and today Trenton does not have any hospital-level maternity care available for anyone.

Black women are seven times more likely and Hispanic women are twice as likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women in our state. Additionally, New Jersey's Nurture NJ plan reports that for Black women the infant mortality rate is 3.5 times higher than that for white women. For Hispanic women, the rate is 2.7 times that of white women. In a city that is majority African American and Hispanic. Shouldn't statistics like these be a flag that Trenton must not only retain its two hospitals but also work to expand its services to our already underserved residents?

A community meeting was held on a recent Monday with little notice and no observed media outreach by Saint Francis to announce the hospital's closing. Any trust that might have been created with the community has disintegrated. It is my hope that renewed efforts at a true conversation with the Trenton community, our healthcare leaders, city government and the local business community will happen. Otherwise, the only people who will suffer are Trentonians who rely on Saint Francis for healthcare, the employees who provide healthcare services and the many small businesses dependent on Saint Francis to survive.

This is the time for Saint Francis Medical Center and its new owners to have a more serious conversation with our community and to stop taking action to close the hospital as fast as possible. The people of Trenton and greater Mercer County are watching.

*Jennifer Williams is a North Ward City Council candidate and lifelong resident of Trenton. She holds an MBA from Tulane University, a bachelor of science degree from La Salle University and currently serves as chair of the Trenton Zoning Board of Adjustment.*

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