

FOURTH GEORGIA HOSPITAL CLOSES

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Imagine driving upwards of 30 miles to the emergency room.

For the local residents of Wheeler County, this is their new reality.

Lower Oconee Community Hospital is closing its doors due to financial troubles, becoming the fourth Georgia hospital to do so in two years.

The 25-bed, critical access hospital hopes to restructure as an urgent care center, according to CEO Karen O'Neal in an [interview](#) with WMAZ. It would provide medical services that aren't considered serious enough for an emergency room visit.

The hospital's financial problems are largely due to the 23 percent uninsured population in the county. Hospitals are required by law to treat patients, regardless of their ability to pay. The federal government makes payments to hospitals to offset the costs of uninsured patients unable to pay for emergency treatment. But these payments have been drastically reduced due to the Medicaid expansion in Obamacare, which was expected by the health care law's designers to be implemented in all 50 states. Since a Supreme Court ruling made the expansion optional, 25 states including Georgia have rejected or are holding out on expanding their Medicaid programs. Gov. Nathan Deal has cited the cost to the state.

Without the Medicaid expansion, hospitals like Lower Oconee must continue paying for poor Americans but with much less funding.

Ten percent of the residents in Wheeler County, located in the 12th district, are unemployed. Forty-one percent of the children live in poverty.

"We just did not have sufficient volume to support the expenses," said O'Neal. "It's a terrible situation, and it's tragic, the loss of jobs and the economic impact."

As of now, there have been [no changes or delays](#) in Obamacare to aid hospitals going under. But the state legislature can help by relaxing the rules on forming rural health care facilities or reimbursing Medicaid spending.