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Medical building boom will bring children's hospital campus to Mesa

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Phoenix Children's Hospital is joining the southeast Valley's medical building boom with a pint-size facility on the southwestern corner of Southern Avenue and Higley Road.

The Phoenix hospital broke ground last week on the 30,000-square-foot specialty- and urgent-care facility in Mesa, designed to meet the East Valley's growing pediatric population and hopefully siphon some traffic from the hospital's main campus near 20th Street and Thomas Road, administrators say.

The center joins three new hospitals in Gilbert, including one just down the street at Higley and Baseline roads, and Mountain Vista Medical Center in east Mesa.

It's part of an ambitious expansion plan that will take the area's only hospital committed to treating children from a single facility in central Phoenix, to an expanded main hospital and three ancillary clinics scattered throughout the Valley.

Phoenix Children's plans to open other urgent-care centers in the West Valley within the next few years, but the southeast Valley's booming child population made Mesa first in line.

"You go where the kids are today," said Bob Meyer, Phoenix Children's president and chief executive officer.

Right now, that's in the East Valley, which has an estimated 300,000 children and annually provides Phoenix Children's with more than 30,000 patients, or more than 15 percent of the hospital's total patients.

Hospital administrators are expanding based on estimates that place at least 1.6 million children in the Valley by 2030.

Phoenix Children's is not alone.

Banner Desert Medical Center in Mesa is expected to start construction this spring on a seven-story children's facility that will add more than 200 pediatric beds.

Phoenix Children's center in Mesa will allow East Valley families to forgo trips to Phoenix for regular appointments and checkups.

The Mesa center will also serve as an urgent-care facility to alleviate the emergency room overcrowding that can plague area hospitals at peak times.

The Mesa center should accommodate 35,000 to 40,000 visits per year, Meyer said.

The facility also will improve wait times for parents and children who have at times had to wait more than a month for appointments to treat ailments such as gastrointestinal disorders. There is typically a backlog of four to six weeks, Meyer said.

Phoenix Children's, which separated from Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center at the beginning of the decade, began addressing the area's growing youth population even as it emerged from a financial crisis during the past four years.

It has been a two-pronged approach, with the hospital aggressively recruiting physicians as administrators planned to expand Phoenix Children's physical presence in the Valley.

"It's real easy to build a building," Meyer said. "The hard part is staffing it."

The hospital has attempted to address that issue with a variety of efforts, including programs to groom pediatric specialists, which have resulted in Phoenix Children's hiring the Valley's only pediatric dermatologists and pediatric rheumatoid specialist.

Some of those specialists will split their time between the main campus and Phoenix Children's ancillary centers, said Grace Caputo, a physician and the hospital's director of urgent-care services who is overseeing the development of the new facilities.

The Southern and Higley facility and others in the Valley modeled after the Mesa center won't have the capacity to house children overnight, but the facilities could grow to include several surgical areas, depending on needs that arise through the first few months, Caputo said.

Officials expect the Mesa facility to open by fall.

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