

Coeur d'Alene Press, Sunday, Jan. 4, 2009 – by Rick Thomas

Inspections delay hiring for medical centers

KOOTENAI COUNTY -- For a full year, the 12 dialysis stations at Fresenius Medical Care/Hayden Lake Dialysis have sat empty while North Idaho patients travel extra miles several times a week for their life-saving treatments.

It's a center that cost almost \$1 million to build, and would employ about a half dozen in the burgeoning health care industry, but first the state must inspect it and approve its operation.

A few miles west, in Post Falls, a \$19 million nursing and rehabilitation center that will employ 150 has been ready for patients since September, and faces similar delays.



Joe Stevens sits through one of his three weekly dialysis sessions Friday at Fresenius Medical Care in Coeur d'Alene. A newer facility for Fresenius in Hayden has been completed for a year, but has been awaiting an inspection by the state before it can open its doors to patients like Stevens.

"We still have no word," said Valerie Zaharie-Glauser, executive director of Life Care Center of Post Falls. "We're waiting. We think it will be soon."

Instead of the 130 patients who could be cared for in the 65,480-square-foot state-of-the-art facility, two are being treated by a professional skeleton staff of about 25. Those patients are required to be at the center when the unannounced surprise inspection is made. "Those two are getting special treatment," Glauser said.

It comes down to priorities. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, which performs inspections, or surveys, under contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Welfare and prioritizes its inspection and approval based on a federal ranking based on need. Tier 1 is the top of four priorities.

Both North Idaho centers are Tier 3, with priority given first to complaints, then to recertification of existing facilities. "We are last on the list," said Shirley Rudebaugh, clinical manager of the dialysis center. That means the Hayden facility may wait even longer as Fresenius focuses on opening another in Sandpoint that is nearly complete.

Like the company's Hayden, Coeur d'Alene and Post Falls dialysis centers, it will have 12 stations for patients in the northern counties. Unlike the Hayden operation, which is low on the priority list because the other Kootenai County centers still are not fully utilized, the Sandpoint facility is considered more essential. "In Post Falls the evening shift is all we have," Rudebaugh said.

Emily Simmitt, spokeswoman for Idaho Health and Welfare, said there are several dialysis centers in Idaho ready for surveys, and Fresenius will be given the choice of which one in North Idaho is inspected first. Even at that, it will be March before it is done.

The Sandpoint center will be good news for Joe Stevens, who since August 2001 has spent four hours in dialysis three days a week, and a similar amount of travel time on public transportation, at the Coeur d'Alene facility -- a 60-mile trip each day.

Fortunately, there is a little to do while in the chair, and some familiar faces. "I watch TV," Stevens said. "I will get to learn some new technicians."

The primary purpose of the surveys is to allow billing of Medicare and Medicaid, Simnitt said. "We do these on behalf of the federal agency. They have not told us to do the surveys yet," she said.

The Life Care Center will also likely be surveyed in March, she said. "That's great news," said Bryan Tapia, division vice president for the Northwest division of Life Care Centers of America in Federal Way, Wash. "It would be awesome if we could get that done."

Paying the ongoing costs of opening and operating the center, even as construction continues next door on The Bridge, an adjacent assisted living center with 104 apartments in 80,713 square feet and Garden Plaza Independent Living, with 153 apartments in 177,543 square feet, has been a major expense, but something they expected from the beginning. Those are expected to open on the 20-acre site west of Wal-Mart next summer.

At full operation, which could take a year or more, payroll there is expected to be about \$2 million, with many of the professional positions paying \$20 to \$25 per hour.

"It all depends on how quick we can admit patients," Tapia said.