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### Bomb threat forces evacuation of Walker Baptist Medical Center

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An early-morning bomb threat led to a mass evacuation of Walker Baptist Medical Center Friday. Just after 8:30 Friday morning, an anonymous call was placed to Walker County E-911 that said a bomb had been placed inside the hospital. A separate threat indicated a bomb was put on a bridge or overpass along Ala. 69 Highway.

Within minutes, Jasper police and firefighters were on the scene, along with Alabama State Troopers, the Walker County Sheriff's Office, Sumiton police and several ambulances from Regional Paramedical Services. Assistance also poured in from across the county, including Walker County Emergency Management Agency interim director Regina Pendley, the Salvation Army's Lona Courington, Walker County Commission chairman Billy Luster and commissioners Keith Davis and Bobby Nunnolley, and Jasper City Council member Jed Daniel.

The decision to evacuate all patients was made by Walker Baptist officials, Jasper Police Chief Connie Cooner Rowe said.

Hospital officials said 76 patients were evacuated, including those in critical care units.

"We evacuated everyone in about 15 to 20 minutes," said Renae McKinney, public relations director for the hospital, "including staff and 76 patients."

Critical patients and mothers in labor were taken across the street to the Alabama Outpatient Surgery Center, she said.

However, she confirmed that one mother gave birth to a child in the hospital parking lot. "While I cannot give you their names, both mother and child are doing very well," she said.

McKinney also said some patients were taken to the Community Health Systems Activities Center in downtown Jasper. "Luckily this isn't a very hot day here in Alabama. But since there is a light rain, the CHS building offers better protection."

Another 29 patients were taken to a facility behind the hospital, and 15 were taken to the front parking lot along Ala. 118, McKinney said.

Some patients were transferred to Birmingham hospitals, she said.

By 11:45 a.m., law enforcement officials had swept the building using bomb-sniffing dogs from the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and Burlington-Northern Sante Fe railroad, and patients and staff were allowed to re-enter the hospital.

Rowe said nothing suspicious was found inside the hospital.

"We do have some leads," Rowe said during an impromptu press conference, "but that's as far as I can go for the sake of the investigation."

Rowe said whoever is responsible for the bomb threat "has got some problems."

"This is a very serious incident and we'll follow this as far as we have to," Rowe said. "This is well beyond just a crank call."

David Waid, co-owner of Regional Paramedical Services, said they almost tripled the number of trucks they have devoted to Walker County to assist with the WBMC evacuation.

"We normally have about five trucks devoted to Walker County, and I think we had about 14 out there today," Waid said.

The paramedics primarily transported the critical patients to Princeton Baptist Medical Center or assisted WBMC personnel in transporting them to the Alabama Outpatient Surgery Center across the street. This involved pulling rescue trucks and paramedics from surrounding counties and then restaffing those counties so no area was without care.

"We were having to call everybody in, but nobody in the community had their call postponed and Walker Baptist was covered," Waid said.

Waid also said he was pleased with the response from his people as well as the response and cooperation between the various agencies who arrived to render assistance. "With every situation there is always something you can learn, but everyone responded quickly and worked well together," Waid said.

Once the hospital had been cleared to return patients to their rooms, officials began focusing their efforts on checking Ala. Highway 69, where the suspect said a bomb had been placed on a bridge.

Officials shut down the highway north to the Cullman County line and south to the Tuscaloosa County line and checked all bridges. The highway was later opened to traffic.

WBMC opened its doors on June 22, 1980.

McKinney, who has been employed there for 22 years, says she cannot remember "anything like this."

"Unfortunately, we practice for things like this. Our staff knows exactly what to do. I am so proud of the staff. It's phenomenal how they are caring for their patients," she said. "It's unfortunate that our patients have to be inconvenienced like this."

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