

communityprofile



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A home in the Hattiesburg Historic District built around the turn of the 20th Century. It is near Hattiesburg's oldest church, built in 1907.

Secret of the South The progressive little city of Hattiesburg, Mississippi offers a warm and welcoming home for cold-weary northerners and rooted southerners alike. Residents enjoy abundance and quality in health care, education, and recreation.

By Julie Sturgeon

HATTIESBURG MAY NOT BE THE STATE capital nor Mississippi's largest city. It doesn't trip off the tongue when listing major southern cities—or remarkable places anywhere in the United States.

Yet in 1976, Hattiesburg's **Forrest General** was the first hospital to transmit EKG signal via satellite. It was also the first hospital to establish a chaplaincy program. Here Phillip Rogers, MD used the first insulin pump on a patient, and Tom Messer, MD tested

the first use of telemetry (a.k.a. cardiac monitoring). The city 50,000 people call home boasts a cancer center, a heart and lung center, outpatient surgical centers, and an exploding home health-care and assisted-living program. The **Rescue 7 Air Ambulance** is one of the longest continuously operated systems in our country.

G. Scott Thomas' *The Rating Guide to Life in America's Great Small Cities* ranks Hattiesburg number one nationwide for health care in its category. It ran sixth when measuring avail-

ability of doctors and specialists in small communities.

And medicine isn't its only claim to fame. Thanks to influences ranging from a diverse economy to mild weather, from the **University of Southern Mississippi** to merit scholars graduating from the public schools, the **U.S. Conference of Mayors** honored Hattiesburg as America's Most Livable Small City in the under-100,000-people category last decade.

"We don't have mountains, but we have rolling hills. We don't have a

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beach, but we have lots of lakes and streams that you can float down in a canoe or swim, ski, or fish,” says Susan Walker, the vice president of the [Area Development Partnership](#). “We have a lot of social clubs and more than 150 churches of all denominations. We’re a very progressive city where people band together to do good things for our community.”

In the hospital halls

The southern hideaway nestled in the southeast corner of Mississippi along I-59 supports two hospitals: Forrest General and [Wesley Medical Center](#). Wesley offers 103 years of history, changing names and locations a few times along the way. Currently owned by Triad (a spin-off of Columbia/HCA, it’s currently the

country’s third largest hospital company), it remains the area’s private hospital.

Forrest General, the county’s 537-bed hospital, was considered a medical hub for 300,000 people in the region almost from the day it opened its doors in July, 1952. That day, the facility had 31 doctors and 70 employees on its payroll. Today, more than 250 physicians work here, and 2,800 people staff its halls—halls in a structure 10 times larger than the original 90-bed facility. Here, “centers of excellence” is the watchword, as physicians carve a reputation in the cancer, cardiac, women and children, behavioral health, and neuroscience fields.

Because [Hattiesburg Clinic](#)—the largest multi-specialty clinic in the

state with 28 satellite clinics—occupies 225,000 square feet in a six-story building, residents could be forgiven for confusing this player with the hospitals, too. Although it began in 1948 as the partnership between an ob/gyn and a general surgeon, today more than 170 board-certified and board-eligible physicians of all specialties call this physician-owned group practice home. The clinic’s key services include an anticoagulation clinic, a breast center, dialysis units, occupational medicine, imaging, an osteoporosis center, and a pacemaker clinic.

It also offers the ingredient Wendell Helveston, MD, a neurologist with the clinic since 1996, says saved him from his University of Mississippi colleagues’ job-hopping tendencies: democracy. “There’s very little of the older physicians in feeding on the younger physicians in

BELOW, The central campus of the University of Southern Mississippi is in central Hattiesburg. It is one of the two largest universities in Mississippi.



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POPULATION:

Hattiesburg: 50,000, Forrest County:
72,604

CLIMATE:

Annual rainfall: 60 inches
Annual snowfall: 0 inches
Average high/low temperatures:
January— 73° / 48°, June— 94° / 66°
Elevation: 161 feet

TRANSPORTATION:

AIRPORTS: Bobby L. Chain Municipal
Airport and Hattiesburg-Laurel Regional
TRAIN: Amtrak (unstaffed station)
INTERSTATES: I 59, U.S. Highways: 11, 49, 98

COST OF LIVING:

Indexed at 94.0 (100 is average)
AVERAGE HOME PRICE: \$69,100 (Forrest
County)
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME: \$27,420
(Forrest County)

RIGHT, Longleaf Trace is a biking, hiking, and equestrian trail converted from abandoned railroad tracks. It extends 40 miles from Hattiesburg to Prentiss, Mississippi. Plans call for extending the trail to the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi.



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terms of practice income and policies. It's very democratic and open," he explains. "It's been the single greatest factor in young physicians coming to this clinic and our high retention rate."

Totaled, the [U.S. Census Bureau's](#) 1997 economic census lists Hattiesburg with 125 businesses in the health-care and social assistance category, with 56 physician offices, 25 dentists, and 14 "other" health practitioners.

"Our hub status evolved over time, but the root comes from the University of Southern Mississippi. Being a college town attracted professional people, staff and the medical community just grew," says Ron Cain, the director of physician support services for Wesley Medical Center. "The

two hospitals partner on major issues that affect our state and community health care, but we compete for the patient just like any other two businesses. It's the kind of competition that breeds quality—we think both hospitals are as good as they are because the other one sits across town, making us better," he says.

Most physicians hold privileges at both hospitals, however, so no one has drawn a definitive line in the sand. "Physicians who may not use our hospital as much as Forrest serve on our boards and our committees," Cain shrugs. "Hattiesburg is a real medical anomaly."

For example, take a look at this small slice of accomplishments:

- IN 2002, DUKE UNIVERSITY CHOSE cardiovascular surgeon Robert J. Robbins, MD to lead a Federal Drug Administration study to evaluate patients undergoing coronary artery bypass graft procedures in south Mississippi. Prevent-IV, as the study is known, will be a five-year commitment to test new treatment of veins used in this surgery, and Forrest General is one of the first of 100 hospitals to participate. "If we can improve the longevity of coronary bypass surgery from 10 or 15 years to

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maybe indefinitely, it will become commonplace to perform this kind of surgery,” Robbins has said.

- WESLEY'S ALAN COVIN, MD, the cardiologist who serves as president of Heart South, is the first doctor in Mississippi to use a new stent coated with the blood-thinning agent heparin to reduce the risk of clot formation. Covin is also responsible for bringing a new defibrillator implant to the region to address atrial fibrillation (a common sustained heart rhythm dysfunction).

- VASCULAR SURGEON VINAY KUMAR, MD used Forrest's facility to introduce the latest in endovascular technology to the area: the [Ancure Endograft System](#), which addresses abdominal aortic aneurysms with minimally invasive repair. “It's being widely used in Europe, and we're excited about the whole project,” he told reporters in 2000. “I think it's going to be a great benefit to medicine in general. I equate it to gall bladder surgery: Twenty years ago, all gall bladder surgeries were done open and now they are performed using laparoscopic equipment. I think this will follow the same path.” Within the first year, he used this procedure 67 times, a number he admitted “far exceeded our expectations.” One patient drove 800 miles from North Carolina to take advantage of the technology.

- IT'S OFFICIAL: WESLEY'S ER RANKS among the best in the country. [Press Ganey](#), a national research specialist in hospital patient satisfaction, ranked the facility in the 97th percentile among its size peers. The ER's docs fell into the 99th percentile.

“When I first came, emergency services served approximately 700 to 800 patients a month,” says Joseph

Patterson, MD, the medical director for this department. “Now we see more than 3,000 patients a month, and we are able to handle almost every serious illness or trauma that comes in the door.”

- IN JANUARY 2002, DAVID LEE, MD and Forrest General became the first in south Mississippi to use the [KyphX Inflatable Bone Tamp](#) surgical balloon to treat osteoporosis patients with compression fractures. This disease causes 700,000 vertebral body compression fractures annually—twice the number of hip fractures.

- PHYSICIANS AT [WESLEY HEART & LUNG CENTER](#) performed the hospital's first off-pump open-heart surgery just two and a half weeks after gaining the technology to do open-heart surgeries in the first place.

“Nowadays, the public just expects everybody to have the latest technology—the MRI, the CT scanners and all that,” Cain says. “But we're probably best known in the community for high touch.” Internal patient satisfaction follow-up surveys reveal statements like “I didn't know this kind of care still existed.”

“Some of it's just the Southern culture,” Cain notes. “I've had technicians come in to work on equipment and they notice that when they meet people in the hallway, they'll make eye contact and speak to you. At 200 beds we're not rinky-dink by any means, but people call you by your first name in the hall.”

Excluding the gaming draw along the coast, Hattiesburg is the highest growth quarter in the state, so primary care physicians are always in demand. “Especially rural,” Cain adds.

“When I say rural, you can be outside of Hattiesburg in 10 minutes and it's rural. So there are plenty of pockets out there that still don't have primary care.”

With 694 births in Hattiesburg in 2001, many of those to mothers between 15 and 24 years of age, Cain also seeks ob/gyn specialties. “And you can never get enough pediatrics,” he says. “When kids are sick, Mom wants them seen now, not tomorrow at 3 pm, so we're in the process of growing our peds.” The want ads go out for urology and a booming radiology niche as well. A peek at the leading causes of death in the city for 2001 also reveals medical needs: Heart disease sits firmly at the top of the list accounting for 43.8 percent of deaths in Forrest County, followed by malignant neoplasms, cerebrovascular disease, emphysema, and diabetes mellitus. The [American Cancer Society](#) reports Mississippi ranks 5th highest in the nation in overall cancer mortality rates, with 6,200 estimated here in 2002. The state also runs higher than national averages in lung and prostate cancer deaths and at national averages for breast and colorectal cancers.

Recruiters don't confess to any oversaturations, although they do say the city's two large, active orthopaedic groups both added physicians recently, so that market might be harder to crack into. Anesthesia, too, is set for the moment, “but because they don't have a patient base, these doctors come and go. They're more mobile,” says Cain.

“Most groups are looking to add somebody,” he adds. “I don't hear anybody poor-mouthing about not being busy enough if they've been here any length of time.”

The growing population makes the

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ABOVE, The Forrest County Library was opened in 1996. The 54,000 square foot building features a 10' by 167' mural painted on sandblasted stainless steel by USM artist William Baggett and suspended 30 feet above the floor. BELOW, Fishing in the Gulf of Mexico is as close as the vacation area of Gulfport and Biloxi, 75 miles south of Hattiesburg. Amberjack and Red Snapper are prized fish.



entire situation even more elastic. Thanks to the Area Development Partnership's [retirement recruitment program](#), Hattiesburg leads the state in attracting the older population—"which makes it even more attractive for doctors to move in because they know eventually these people have to seek medical care," Walker notes. In 10 years of concentrated effort, the organization has welcomed 700 new retiree households to the city.

Walker consults industry committees for feedback to help the Partnership better promote

Hattiesburg and she heard when local doctors asked that new retirees to the area receive a physician directory. In 2002 the partnership aired a video in 25 major markets and six networks to reach more than 20 million people with the city's quality-of-life message. Such enthusiastic marketing has landed Hattiesburg on the NBC Nightly News, the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* and twice in the *New York Times*.

On the weekend

The good news is that Hattiesburg's

economy doesn't rest with one industry, so if one industry takes a dive, it won't cripple the community. "If a company decides to take its business to Mexico, it doesn't put 20 percent of our population out of a job. Even when 9/11 occurred, a couple of travel agencies took it on the chin, but for the most part everybody else kept doing business. So we're not affected so much by national or regional events that could shut doors," says Cain.

According to Walker, more than 1,000 people work at Camp Shelby National Guard training base, the University of Southern Mississippi employs 2,000 people (not to mention the retail impact 15,000 students not counted as part of the "official" population have on local businesses), and the hospitals pass out paychecks to approximately 5,700 people. Wesley's Financial Report for 2000 said it pumped \$27.1 million into salaries, \$936,656 to local property taxes, \$1.7 million to capital dollars, and \$8.2 million to local vendors. Unemployment overall stands at three percent—just over half the national average—so most households enjoy a stable income. Full-time males earn a median income of \$28,742 annually and full-time females in the work force bring home \$20,500, according to the US Bureau of the Census in 2000.

Finding places to spend that money doesn't require effort—Hattiesburg supports two malls housing national retailers like Bath & Body Works, The Disney Store, The Gap, Office Depot, JC Penney, Victoria's Secret, Gymboree, Sears, Stein Mart, The Limited, and Dillard's. Retail accounts for more than \$1.1 billion of

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the metro area's economy.

The university contributes a good cultural base with the College of Arts' theatre, dance, music, and art gallery. Local patrons also support the Hattiesburg Civic Light Opera, Hattiesburg Arts Council, City of Hattiesburg Concert Band, the Hattiesburg Junior Pops, the Hattiesburg Children's Chorus, the Meistersingers, and the South Mississippi Art Association. Casinos at the nearby coast bring in big acts like Bill Cosby and Cirque de Soleil, while New Orleans, 87 miles away, offers excitement metropolitan style. "Party down there, then come back to practice in a safe community where you can put your kids in a decent school without paying \$10,000 a year for a private education like you would in New Orleans," Cain laughs.

Recreational pursuits include 12 golf courses and tennis courts for the athlete, with hunting, fishing, canoeing, and camping for the outdoors-minded.

More than 25 new neighborhoods have sprung up in the past 10 years, with houses at a median price of \$69,100—although a dozen or so sold for more than \$1 million in the county in 2000. Most homes feature five or more rooms in their square footage, and of the 27,000 households, 26,000 report one person per bedroom, so families here don't double up the kids. A median mortgage payment weighs in at \$239 a month, which represents less than 15 percent of the household income for the largest chunk of residents.

According to Cain, most physicians find this region an economic playground. [Medical Group Management Association](#) physician compensation numbers show doctors in the South

make more than anywhere else in the country. This may be related to the fact that managed care covers less than 10 percent statewide, and Medicaid levels hover at 20.18 percent of Mississippi's population. "There has been scarce interest in the Mississippi HMO market," reports the [Mississippi State Department of Health](#) in its rural health-care plan. "Sixteen HMOs were operating in Mississippi as of March, 1998 and three other organizations had applied for a Certificate of Authority. However, commercial HMO penetration is very small. [The Department of Insurance](#) estimates that about one percent of the total state population was enrolled at the end of 1995. Industry data suggest that HMO penetration has grown to two percent presently." The authors say financial losses, loss of autonomy, and an influx of non-Mississippi-based insurers are the common reasons providers and insurers resist managed care. It doesn't hurt that the casinos—among the state's large employers—usually choose to take the self-funded indemnity route.

Most physicians who call Hattiesburg home were raised in the South and discovered its medical reputation by osmosis. That was certainly Helveston's story as he grew up in Pascagoula on the Gulf, did his residency at the University of Florida, and began interviewing with several larger cities in the surrounding states. Eventually, the low managed care and the fact Mississippi is an underserved state for neurologists convinced him there was no place like home.

Lately, however, Cain has caught a few from the Pittsburgh area and West Virginia, where the medical in-

dustries are taking a beating. "These doctors just finished their residencies so they're also sick of the cold by this point. They want to start their cars year round," he laughs. Still, he has to sell Mississippi first before outsiders will consider even a visit—but once over that hurdle, a vast majority say 'yes.'

"I invited three different physicians who weren't from the area, all looking at other areas of the country. Two of the wives said, 'Absolutely no way will we look at Mississippi.' After the visit, both women called their recruiters and cancelled the rest of the interviews. They found their home," he says. His luck runs out when it comes to recruiting young, single females from large cities. "They don't see themselves in the dating scene here," he explains. "But get a gal who's married with a couple of kids and wants a good quality of life and they pick this community."

Helveston agrees—he loves to tell the story of a fellow neurologist who joined Hattiesburg Clinic after being raised in Brooklyn and New Jersey. "He's moved about as far as you can get and is still making it—doing extremely well with a thriving practice."

Walker bashes her head into the same barriers: From Hollywood movies to newspaper editorials, Mississippi takes a bad rap as a place where people don't wear shoes. Granted, the [Corporation for Enterprise Development's](#) 2002 report card on the state's economic development from a global context rates Mississippi 47th in average annual pay, 44th in teacher salaries, 45th in college attainment, 44th in high school education, 50th in patents issued, and 50th in households with computers. On the

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medical scene, this state ranks 40th in employer health coverage, 49th in infant mortality, 50th in health professional shortage areas, and 50th in teen pregnancy. On the other hand, its voting rate sits 19th and private lending to small businesses comes in 3rd.

Walker's crusade centers around getting the message out that racial tensions aren't what you see on television. Hattiesburg's mayor is African-American, as is a portion of the city council. Its chairman-of-the-board-elect is African American. "We work together to build convention centers, multipurpose centers, youth programs. Our leadership program always includes all minorities. Merit scholarships are available to all public schools. That makes a huge statement for economic development," she points out. Last March, the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials agreed, awarding Hattiesburg first runner-up status in its City Cultural Diversity Awards.

"There are Harvard graduates, former marketing gurus from Madison Avenue, and Wall Street movers who retired here," Walker adds. "They don't find us backward. We're a very progressive city." ■

Julie Sturgeon is a free-lance writer based in Indiana and regularly contributes features and community profiles to UO.