

Belleville News-Democrat
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Don't miss this deadline

The state legislature could adjourn in a little more than a week, and yet lawmakers are still dickering over medical malpractice reform and caps on legal awards. If the lack of action makes you nervous, it should. The metro-east stands to lose more doctors than it already has if reforms aren't enacted this spring.

The obvious loss is health care options. The metro-east had 136 fewer doctors in 2004 than it did in 2002, and some specialties are either gone or severely limited. If you suffer a head injury in an accident, you just have to hope there's time to get to an emergency room in St. Louis.

The bigger concern is how devastating this has been so far and how much worse it could get for our region's economy.

Our area just breathed a collective sigh of relief because Scott Air Force Base, our biggest single employer, isn't on the base closure list. Well, a recent impartial study found that the health care and social assistance sector in St. Clair and Madison counties employs more than double the number of people who work at Scott -- 27,278 people, or about 17 percent of our total workforce.

The study showed that each hospital on average employs 848 workers directly, creates 1,025 full-time equivalent positions in the community and has an economic impact of \$168 million.

Area lawmakers say that just a few details have yet to be worked out. The biggest hurdle of caps was cleared a week ago when House Speaker Michael Madigan agreed to call a bill that included them. Area residents need to keep the pressure on their lawmakers, Madigan and Senate President Emil Jones to wrap this up. And the leaders need to tell Democratic lawmakers to stop trying to sabotage the bill with obstructionist amendments.

It would be terrible to get this close, and still not get reforms enacted. We don't want to hear the excuse that reforms would have passed except they ran out of time.