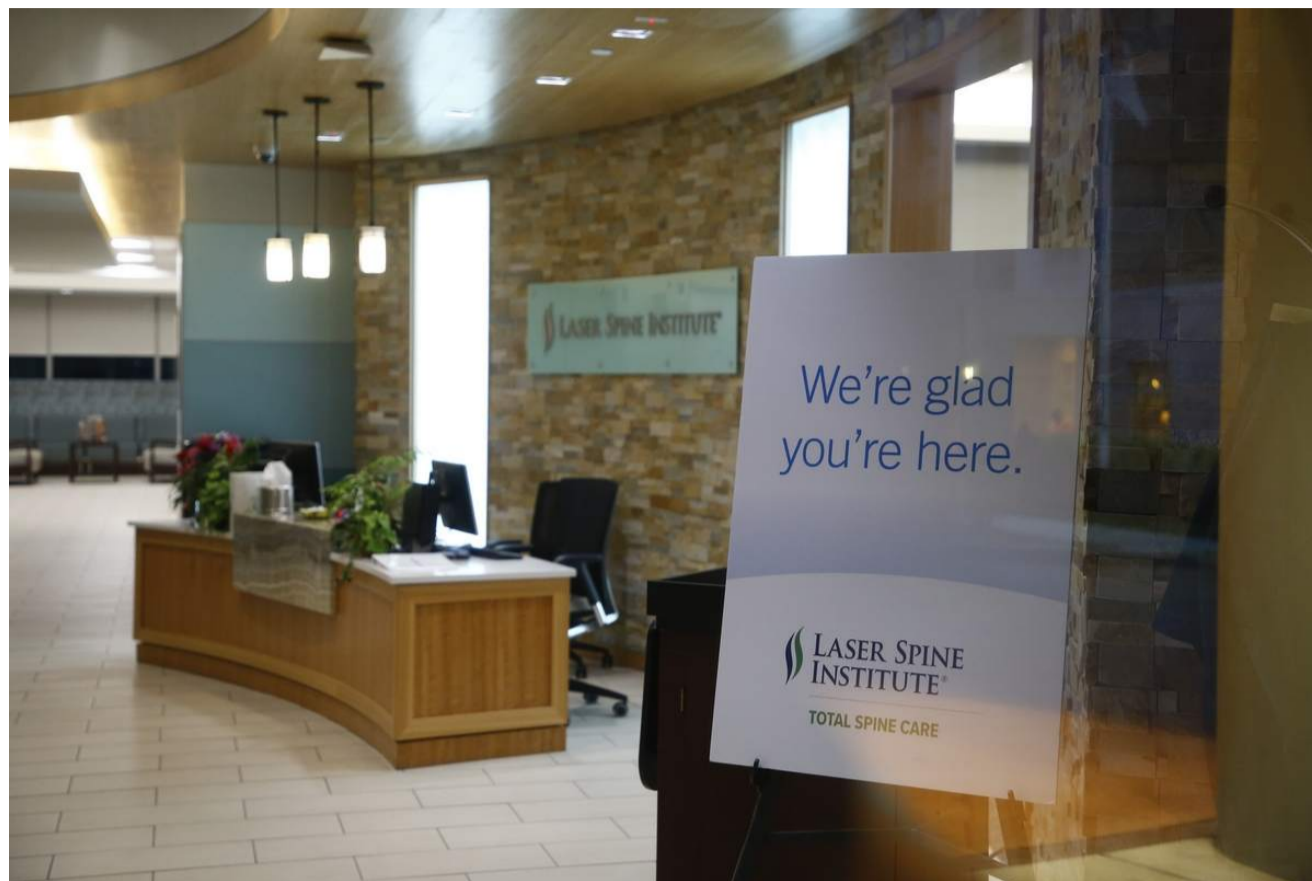


The fallout spreads after Laser Spine Institute's sudden closing

From lost jobs to lawsuits, scores of patients and former employees enter an uncertain time after the 14-year-old practice abruptly closes its doors.



The lobby at the Laser Spine Institute in Tampa was deserted Friday afternoon after the company suddenly ceased operations. Uncertainty ensued, with employees and patients trying to figure out what's next. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

By [Justine Griffin](#)

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TAMPA — Hundreds of medical staff are looking for new jobs. Scores of patients are trying to figure out follow-up care or where to pay their bills. Lawyers have filed lawsuits, and doctors are angling to pick up some new business.

The fallout from Friday's sudden shutdown of the Laser Spine Institute has spread far and wide as people try to figure out what happened, and what happens next.

Two class action lawsuits filed Monday in Tampa federal court address the abruptness of the closing, alleging that Laser Spine violated the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Act by not giving employees at least 60 days' notice. The suits, including one that seeks to represent as many as 1,000 Laser Spine employees across the nation, seek 60 days' pay and benefits from the company.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE: [Tampa's Laser Spine Institute abruptly closes, lays off hundreds](#)

Employees found out they were losing their jobs the same day the institute ceased operations, closing locations in Tampa, Ohio, Arizona and Missouri. The 14-year-old company was known for its minimally invasive spinal procedures.

Many patients — some from Tampa Bay and others who traveled here for spinal surgeries performed at the institute's Avion Park office — were stunned.

A Laser Spine spokeswoman said the company has reached out to all recent surgical patients and those scheduled for surgery or post-surgical visits, to transfer their care to "appropriate local surgeons and providers" in their communities.



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Physician Partners of America, a spinal practice headquartered in Tampa Bay but with offices around Florida and other states, will host a job fair at its Tampa office Wednesday to help former Laser Spine employees find work in a similar field.

The event will take place from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Physician Partners' Tampa office, 550 N Reo St. The company has about 100 open positions, including jobs at offices in Tampa, St. Petersburg and New Port Richey.

Related coverage: [Laser Spine Institute joins ghosts of Tampa Bay businesses past, from Maas Bros to Webb's City](#)

"We are very familiar with their model and the services they provide," Dr. Rodolfo Gari, founder and principal of the practice, said of the Laser Spine Institute. He added that Physician Partners already has many former Laser Spine employees on its staff, including Dr. James St. Louis, the institute's surgical founder.

As for patients who need surgery, Gari said his practice is up to the task.

"We offer the same surgical procedures patients would have had done at Laser Spine," he said. "They don't have to start all over. We can pick up their medical records and continue."

The practice, he said, accepts Medicare and most insurance plans.

The Spine Center Atlanta also is reaching out on social media to spread the word that they are accepting spinal patients from around the Southeast.

"We can take virtual spine appointments from literally anywhere. If they like what they hear, they can fly here for surgery," said Dr. James Chappuis, the founder of Spine Center Atlanta. "If a patient recently had surgery and needs post-op follow-up care, we are willing to do that free of charge. It just seems like the right thing to do."

On another front, patients who are still making payments on their Laser Spine Institute bills were unsure of what to do next. Most haven't heard of any changes or updates coming to their payment plans since the institute closed its doors.

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Matt Issman and his wife, Angela Reed, traveled to Tampa last year for a spinal surgery from their home in Mississippi. Reed had a pinched nerve in her back. Physicians at a spine center in Baton Rouge, La., recommended a fusion operation. But the couple turned to Laser Spine Institute for a second opinion and a clinical option that wasn't so invasive.

"We did the consultation online and talked to a doctor over the phone, then drove there," Issman said.

The surgery was successful — Reed felt immediate relief. And she had only a three-inch incision to show for it.

Then the bill came.

"At the time, they only accepted one type of insurance and it was not the Blue Cross Blue Shield plan she had from work," Issman said. "It was expensive. They offered some type of payment plan but we're still making payments on it."



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Tim Molinari, a Largo chef, is used to dealing with back pain from working on his feet all day. But in 2017, he was in so much pain he could barely work or even play with his kids.

After surgery at Laser Spine Institute, it took him longer to recover than expected and he was stunned by a \$16,000 bill he received in the mail.

"I felt like I was in good hands and I didn't feel rushed or manipulated," Molinari said. "I did all the protocol stuff with my insurance but I knew they were out of network. I was prepared to pay a couple thousand dollars out of pocket, but I was shocked when I got the bill."

He still has some pain in his lower back, but it's not nearly as bad as it was before surgery. He's still making payments on his bill, and even talked to a Laser Spine representative on Thursday about his account.

"I'm not sure how this works," he said. "I don't know what to do next."

A spokeswoman from Laser Spine said patients should continue to pay their bills as usual, but she did not clarify whether the institute would be reaching out to them with more information.

John Lembo worked for Laser Spine's marketing department in Tampa for about a year before he was laid off on Friday.

"We were all surprised," he said. "People were sad and emotional. I enjoyed the job. Everyone worked hard and it was, overall, just a fun place to work."

In his role on social media, Lembo interacted with patients whose lives he said were changed by surgeries performed at the institute.

"People complained that what we did was a scam, but it was never a scam," he said. "We helped people. The patients you saw on the commercials, they were legitimate patients."

Lembo said that former employees have gathered in a group on Facebook, where they're sharing job postings and offering support. He found a job with a local public relations firm in Tampa.

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