

## Editorial

# Hospitals Need Room To Be Prepared For Tomorrow

Sometimes, the headlines can seem a little contradictory.

At the same time that we're reading that hospitals and other health care providers are struggling, losing money, or even laying off employees, we're also reading that they're taking on expansion projects, adding new services, or moving into new fields of care.

While this might seem confusing to the public and, in some cases, to employees — especially if there have been workforce reductions or budget cutbacks — the phenomenon is an intriguing piece of the puzzle that is modern health care.

In short, hospitals must continue to grow, despite their well-documented fiscal woes, or they risk losing their ability to compete.

Holyoke Hospital's recently announced \$11 million, 33,000-square-foot expansion and renovation project is a perfect example. Like all hospitals in the area and across the state, the hospital has been hit and hit hard by inadequate reimbursements from private and public payers. While two-thirds of the hospitals in the state have been losing money the past several years and others have gone out of business altogether, Holyoke has managed to squeeze out very small positive operating margins. This is due to tight fiscal management and new operating efficiencies that have wound up hurting the hospital in one way.

Indeed, when the state announced it was making funds available to "distressed" hospitals in 2000, Holyoke Hospital President Hank Porten applied for relief, only to be turned down because his hospital didn't meet the specific definition of "distressed."

Still, Porten uses that word to describe his facility — "every hospital in the state is distressed," he said — and yet he and his board are moving forward with an ambitious expansion project, one of the largest in the hospital's 108-year history.

When asked if the hospital could afford to take on such an initiative at this time, Porten said, in essence, that it couldn't afford not to.

He's right.

Despite their fiscal woes, hospitals can't afford to stand still or wait for the economic situation to improve. If they do, they risk falling behind — in terms of technology, customer service, and community outreach — at a time when competition within the industry is greater than ever.

Holyoke's expansion plans call for the building of two new operating rooms and two new endoscopy rooms, as well as the renovation or expansion of the patient registration department, front lobby, recovery rooms, and other facilities. A \$4 million capital campaign is set to begin this spring, and ground will be broken by late summer.

Porten told *The Healthcare News* that the changes aren't for today — although some of them are, in fact, overdue — but for tomorrow. To remain competitive for the long term, he said, the hospital will need larger operating rooms to accommodate advancing technology and more square footage to handle ever-increasing volumes of outpatient cases.

While Holyoke is moving forward with its plans, it is clear that many infrastructure improvements and needed expansions are being put on hold because hospitals and other providers don't have the flexibility to take them on.

Indeed, the ability to plan for tomorrow is what is being jeopardized in the ongoing fiscal battles being fought by the state's hospitals, nursing homes, behavioral health centers, and other providers.

One administrator told *The Healthcare News* that in the current environment, hospitals — most of them anyway — are able to "get by," but that simply isn't good enough.

Hospitals and other providers need to be able to do more than pay the bills on their desks today, he said. They need the flexibility to invest in new technology, take care of their infrastructure, and put in place a workforce that can meet the community's needs for the long term.

Hospitals have always had to keep one eye on the future, he explained, but the current budget situation allows most to do only that — look toward the future but not exactly take steps to be prepared for it.

The Legislature begins a new budget session in a few weeks (yes, they just finished with last year's), and there will be extreme pressure to make cuts in a number of areas to make ends meet. By being frugal and forcing hospitals and other providers to operate on the edge the past several years, state and federal leaders have made it more difficult for them to adequately prepare for tomorrow.

In this budget session, they need to make sure that providers have the flexibility to do more than just get by.

## Opinion

# Hospital Strives To Make A Difference With 'Healing Arts'

Make no mistake about it — no one enjoys having to stay in a hospital. To most people, the very idea generally brings up images of health problems, uncomfortable tests, anxious moments, and unpleasant surroundings.

Hold on there, say health care workers at Franklin Medical Center in Greenfield, who are trying to make those stereotypes about unpleasant surroundings go away completely.

To that end, hospital administrators began two years ago to study ways to improve the aesthetic experience of going to the hospital — whether as a patient, visitor, or worker. But the idea wasn't just to gloss over the negative aspects of a hospital stay; the goal was to create an atmosphere of health and healing that benefits everyone in the facility and complements the physical treatment patients receive.

Last year, the first aspects were unveiled of what was dubbed the Franklin Medical Center Healing Arts Project. Concerts from local musicians are presented monthly, and local artists display their work on the hospital walk. Courtyards and gardens have been redesigned, and food service has been upgraded. And that's just for starters.

The result? A year later, doctors, nurses, and patients are all praising the efforts to apply the benefits of the humanities and nature into the healing process. To hear them tell it, the program simply works. More scientific studies of how these factors affect patients' health are promised for early this year, but organizers are confident that those studies will uncover positive things.

Why? According to Jeanine Young-Mason, one of the program's co-directors, patients are affected in more ways than one by clean air, soothing music, stimulating artwork on the walls, easily available 'comfort foods,' and an emphasis on the healing powers of nature outdoors.

They also need to feel welcomed and cared about at the hospital, so part of the program stresses the need for staff to be compassionate to everyone they deal with, and children have a new play area in the Emergency Department to take some of the sting out of their stay. If the hospital is going to be a healing center, she said, that starts with a healing environment.

Can factors as simple as art and nature really make a difference? It clearly can't hurt. What Franklin Medical Center has done is to make a real effort to improve care in unconventional ways.

It's a good lesson for other hospitals in the Bay State, most of whom are cash-strapped, understaffed, and struggling with budgets in the red due partly to poor state funding. On one side, they see legislators making insufficient efforts to improve institutions' financial state, and on the other side, shortages of nurses and specialists in fields ranging from radiology to cardiology have made it more difficult to mete out proper care on those tight budgets.

And then, here is a hospital that is making a difference in the way patients feel by using methods that have nothing to do with staffing or finances. Bringing in local artists and musicians, who are surely happy for the opportunity, does not amount to any significant cost. And the redesigned courtyard, the soothing 'healing gardens,' and the children's play area have been developed with significant help from students and professors at the University of Massachusetts and Franklin County Technical School, as well as other volunteers. Meanwhile, plants, money, and other resources have been donated to the cause.

Now, to be sure, the plight of hospitals is real and worrisome at all institutions, including Franklin. The state Legislature must still address inadequacies in Medicaid reimbursement and the uncompensated care pool. And high schools and colleges must continue to push medical careers as viable options for young people.

But in at least one case, a hospital is not relying on the reversal of current trends to improve patient care and staff satisfaction, and it is succeeding, at least in a small way. And that's an art form in itself.

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