

A VISION FOR A MORGAN COUNTY REGIONAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

THE PRESENT

It is 2010. Congress and the President have just passed a sweeping healthcare reform bill that is sure to change the way care is delivered in the future. Most of the prominent changes will be implemented beginning in 2014, which means that Morgan County has a window of opportunity to anticipate how it should respond to future challenges. Much about the reform bill is undefined; but, what seems inevitable is that creative and efficient use of resources will be imperative to meet the changing needs in the County.

Faced with these challenges, some County leaders sought and received a grant from the Colorado Health Foundation last fall to study the health needs of the County and identify opportunities for collaboration in order to better serve all its residents. The Healthcare Horizon Council was formed and the work began. Needs assessments were conducted, strengths and weaknesses identified, an inventory of available services was collected, and various “experts” were brought in to share their wisdom in hopes that a roadmap for success could be developed.

Now the time for action is here. Difficult decisions need to be made, and the Council is an appropriate voice to put opportunities in motion. The Council met to discuss what success would look like in 5 years. They concluded success could come in the form of small, incremental steps involving new partnerships. Or, the Council could attempt to promote more significant change with greater potential impact by directly confronting long standing, and somewhat controversial, issues. The old adage “Do what is right, not what is easy” served as a guiding principle in the Council’s decision to choose the latter course.

The needs assessment clearly pointed out numerous gaps in services in the County. Among these were a shortage of mental health services, inadequate access to dental care for many, limited hours of coverage by primary care clinics, and rejection by some providers of public insurance, causing access problems even for some who are insured. A rising problem of substance abuse and too few resources to respond to it can no longer be ignored. Surveys also showed frustration by many residents at referrals of patients to providers outside the County due to competitive forces and misguided perceptions about available quality, when adequate resources exist within the County for treatment. Sobered by the reality that resources are scarce to meet these needs, the Council agreed that squandering of precious resources through inefficiencies rooted in duplicative technology and non productive competition must be addressed.

There is strong consensus among Council members that unproductive competition between the two hospitals in the County has resulted in unnecessary duplication of technology, has complicated physician recruitment, caused unnecessary exporting of some patients outside the County, and is the single

largest source of inefficient use of resources. If this issue could be successfully addressed, resources would be freed up and diverted to building a stronger delivery system which might address some of the unmet needs previously mentioned. Attempts have been made in the past to encourage collaboration between the management companies responsible for operating the hospitals, but without any meaningful progress. The competitive nature of the hospitals reflects some of the competitive tendencies of the two communities in which they reside, which are steeped in history and community pride. But when community pride detracts from meeting the needs of its residents, the Council feels a moral imperative to attempt to influence a more productive future.

The first priority of the Council was to agree that the Boards of both hospitals must be challenged to seriously consider ways to collaborate, use resources more efficiently, and focus on the greater needs of the County. The current reform environment makes this a logical time to address things like economies of scale through consolidation and cooperation, access to capital for future replacement of aging physical plants, recruitment of physicians who can benefit financially and in quality terms from centralizing a critical mass of patients, and coordinating electronic health records for patient benefit. This collaboration could take several forms--cooperation by the existing management companies, selection of a single management company to operate both hospitals, common ownership of the two hospitals, or a joint venture between the two hospitals to share services and eliminate costly duplication. The Council realizes this can only happen if the governing boards of both institutions are committed to objectively looking at the possibilities offered by true collaboration. The first conclusion of the Council's visioning process was to present a recommendation to both hospital boards to commit to a genuine exploration of collaborative opportunities and the expected results within the range of options described above. Representatives of the boards of both institutions participated in the discussion leading to this recommendation, a tribute to the seriousness with which they, and their fellow Council members, take their roles.

Following a presentation to the hospital boards, which hopefully will lead to positive action on the recommendation, the Council will continue its work on the other important needs outlined above to stimulate partnerships to increase access and expand necessary services beyond hospital care. Public education regarding existing services, quality availability within the County, and the likely impact of health reform initiatives in Morgan County, was identified as a critical component for meaningful success. Community forums will be scheduled as soon as possible after the Council meets with the hospital boards. The Council also agreed that a new grant application should be pursued, which seeks funds to move from the inventory of resources and analysis of needs already completed, to the work of implementing collaborative initiatives.

THE VISION

The progress in shaping a regional health care system in just 5 years has been impressive. The hospital boards responded to the challenge and the hospitals are functioning as a single entity dedicated to meeting not just the needs of their respective cities, but coordinating delivery for the entire County. Physicians are credentialed in both hospitals, specialty services have been divided between the hospitals, eliminating duplication and centralizing volume. More patients are now receiving care in the

County, and relationships with providers in major population centers have been established for specialty services beyond the scope of the County system. Recruitment and retention of physicians has become much easier, as doctors see the potential for their practices to grow in a system that supports and rewards quality. They and other health care providers are excited to be part of a true system of care focused on meeting the needs of its community. The banding together of the hospitals and providers has resulted in many efficiencies, and insurance premiums have stabilized and are beginning to decrease due to reduced costs and coordinated negotiations with insurance companies. Much excitement exists about a new, combined Morgan County Regional Health System to be built midway between Fort Morgan and Brush. Conversion of the old hospitals to multipurpose community centers is part of the plan. When finished, this initiative will result in an estimated increase of at least 400 permanent jobs.

The benefits of collaboration have extended well beyond the hospitals. The primary care network is becoming a model for the state. Salud and the hospitals, through joint planning, have nearly doubled the number of primary care doctors residing in the County, who have formed a single group which covers all ambulatory clinics. Hours of coverage have expanded to all day Saturday, with extended hours 3 days a week to make care more convenient for working families. Much sought after Family Practice residencies offer a an experience where physicians not only receive excellent training, but become excited about the delivery system and want to become part of the community on a long term basis. The same enthusiasm has extended to key specialists and other health professionals, who see the growing market and highly desirable lifestyle as a superior option to big city living. Now that nearly all citizens are covered by some form of health insurance, providers are willing to accept all insurances and access has markedly improved.

This would not have been possible without the support of many. Morgan Community College remains a highly valued resource which excels in educating the health care workers of the future. New tracks in mental and oral health have been developed to meet these important needs. The County commissioners have succeeded in breaking apart some of the historic barriers to collaboration between the two cities, realizing that sharing of resources is the most sensible approach when resources are tight. The results are becoming clear as growth rates in the County have exceeded those in most of the state and nation.

Community leaders and providers realized that the benefits of meeting needs at a broader County level was superior to the competitive model previously supported by the Fort Morgan and Brush communities. A series of community forums revealed that the opposition to this approach was centered in a small minority of citizens, making it much easier to pursue the collaboration with conviction. The benefits beyond health care have been the biggest surprise of all. Perhaps the best testament to the power of collaboration can be heard at dinner tables and in high school hallways as the next generation talks of why they want to make Morgan County their home for years to come. Fortunately, the leaders of Ebenezer, provider of excellent long term care services for years, have time to plan accordingly.

The job is far from over. Getting started was the hardest part. It took courage and commitment to a higher cause than either city could offer on its own. What couldn't be predicted was the swelling of pride on the part of the both communities. There is still some competition and always will be. But

destructive competition has been replaced by constructive competition in which both communities have benefitted in obvious ways. One city may win a battle here or there, but they have both learned the benefits of being allies on the important things. Some will never forget the famous football feud of half century ago, but a new, "collective" pride is slowly replacing the local pride which used to stop at each city's limits.