

SPEAKING OUT

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Teamwork has paid off for area patients, health care providers

BY DAVID KLEIN

A statewide report released Tuesday is testament to Rochester's long history of health care collaboration and our collective willingness to face difficult problems on our own.

Area business leaders, health care providers and insurers have worked together – and are continuing to do so – on important health care issues. Our community collaborated when we needed to close two hospitals, and we've been proactive about matching the community's need to the purchase of expensive medical equipment to slow down a medical arms race. This community approach is one of the main reasons why our six-county region was unaffected by the report that called for a quarter of the state's hospitals to be reconfigured, merged or closed.

The Rochester region has a well-earned reputation for community-based health care planning and cooperation. A 1992 U.S. General Accounting Office report cited Rochester's health care planning as an important reason why more people here have health insurance and why hospital and health insurance costs in Rochester are lower than they are elsewhere. As a presidential candidate, Bill Clinton often hailed our health care system as a national model because of community planning.

Thanks to Rochester's collaborative health care spirit, local hospitals aren't impacted by the "rightsizing" recommendations of the Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century that concluded that 4,200 hospital beds statewide should be eliminated, nine hospitals should close and 50 hospitals should be restructured.

Rochester's health care system has truly been a community effort – from health care providers to government officials, business leaders and health insurers. For example:

- The Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency is the only health planning agency of its kind left in the state. It keeps an eye on issues such as health care capacity and advocates for accessible, affordable, high quality health care.

- The Rochester-based Community Technology Assessment Advisory Board, or CTAAB, makes sure that new medical services, technology and big capital expenditures are needed in our community and not unnecessarily driving up health care costs.

- Our major local hospitals – Strong Memorial, Rochester General, Highland and Unity – continue to rank high in quality and financial stability among hospitals in the state. These hospitals have high patient occupancy rates at a time when other hospitals in the state have too many empty beds to survive without changes.

- Rochester-area officials took it upon themselves to close hospitals. One notable example is Unity Health System's closure of acute care services at St. Mary's Hospital that has since evolved into a specialty center full of services such as brain injury rehabilitation. ViaHealth System and the Geneva-based Finger Lakes Health System have made similar moves to meet community needs.

- Local businesses continue to partner with health care leaders to bolster the health care system. The Rochester Business Alliance is leading a communitywide effort to expand electronic health records that will improve patient safety, cut medication errors and save money.

- Local health insurers and hospitals have joined forces to ensure an adequate health care work force by helping to expand the nursing program at Monroe Community College, among other moves.

- The area's nonprofit health plans continue to earn national reputations for high quality while investing in safety net products for the uninsured.

The report should make this area's stakeholders feel proud that they opted for community-based solutions and collaboration a long time ago.

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