

MaineHealth merger praised at Waldo County Healthcare Annual Meeting

By Tanya Mitchell
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Belfast — More than 100 members of the community advisory council of Waldo County Healthcare Inc. met Nov. 16 for its annual meeting.

The meeting, which took place at the Hutchinson Center, was largely focused on last year's decision by the WCHI Board of Directors to approve bylaw changes that allowed WCHI to obtain a membership with MaineHealth, the parent company of Maine Medical Center in Portland. The board voted to make changes to the bylaws at its Board of Incorporators' meeting Sept. 15, 2008.

The WCHI Community Advisory Council is formally known as the Board of Incorporators.

The board's initial choice to explore joining one of the state's larger health-care networks instead of continuing to operate independently was based on the state's push to consolidate schools, as the TRJ has previously reported.

That development had those in the local health-care community concerned about what could happen to community hospitals like Waldo County General Hospital, which had been operating independently for 106 years.

The final decision to merge, however, was made over the course of about two years.

At the 2007 annual meeting, the board had discussed the idea of affiliating with one of Maine's three health-care systems. At that time, WCHI Executive Director Mark Biscone announced the board would investigate the benefits of obtaining such a membership. The three systems the board initially considered affiliating with were associated with Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston and MaineHealth.

Many of the 135 council members who were present received positive comments Nov. 16 about last fall's decision to affiliate with Maine's largest health-care network.

Council members heard from:

- Dale Kuhnert, who serves on the board of directors of both WCHI and MaineHealth. Kuhnert said while WCHI is small, "there is no sense of sitting in the back of the room. We are listened to and contribute." He said MaineHealth is "on the same page" as WCHI.
- Executive Director Mark Biscone, who reviewed initiatives that WCHI has worked on with MaineHealth and 12 areas of improvement WCHI is now focusing on, including reducing emergency room visits and readmission of patients, providing pharmacy coverage, creating a system-wide information system so a patient has one medical record, dealing with the reduction in state and federal reimbursements, increasing telemedicine possibilities, and changes in Medicaid and Medicare rates.

"Thank you for voting to be part of MaineHealth. It has proved on so many levels to be the right thing to do," Biscone said, adding that a study by MaineHealth comparing hospitals in the MaineHealth system showed that WCHI had the lowest average cost increase from 2003-2007.

- Dr. Kent Clark, director of medical affairs for WCHI, who said he was apprehensive about joining MaineHealth and losing the uniqueness of the hospital, but said MaineHealth "truly wants a partnership and has no desire to change how we do business. They give us the tools and resources to take better care of our community."

For example, he said, the E-ICU allows experts in critical care from Portland to monitor patients in the intensive care unit 24 hours a day, which helps give staff early indications if the critical status of a patient is changing. The providers at the hospital then discuss the situation with those critical care experts to come up with treatment options. That program allows ICU patients "to be cared for in their own community by people they know and trust," Clark said, adding that in a year, patient days in the ICU were reduced by 100, and an estimated six patient lives were saved because of E-ICU.

- Linda Drinkwater, the chief financial officer at WCHI, said that joining MaineHealth has saved more than \$1 million in net operating expenses, with the substantial savings coming from the employee health insurance program and commercial insurance policies. She expects more savings in the upcoming year as a result of being a MaineHealth member in areas including the purchase of medical supplies, equipment and pharmaceuticals, and reduced legal fees.

She said MaineHealth would also provide auditing expertise, help with new billing and coding regulations, and networking and information-opportunities for collaboration for many WCHI departments. Drinkwater said saving more money will be crucial, since the state is proposing more cuts in reimbursements while increasing taxes on hospitals. In addition, bad debts and charitable care rates have risen 27 percent.

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