

## Ensuring Access with a Hospital's Conversion to a Freestanding Emergency Department Piedmont Mountainside Hospital Emergency Services Ellijay, Georgia

It was January 2016, when Atlanta-based SunLink Health informed the community of its intention to close North Georgia Medical Center (NGMC), in Ellijay, GA. The Gilmer County Board of Commissioners expressed skepticism and sought assurance that the medical facility would remain. Openly they believed that the best the county residents could hope for was to have the emergency department (ED) open for one year.



**Piedmont Mountainside Hospital Emergency Services**

Gilmer County has about 29,700 residents. It has a median age of 45.1 significantly above the state median of 36.4 and a poverty rate of 23.5 percent, also well above the state average of 17 percent. Gilmer County ranks highest among counties in Georgia for diabetes (12.4 percent), obesity (29.7 percent), smoking (16.9 percent) and deaths by motor vehicle (25.5/100K population). In Gilmer County, the largest share of households have a median income of less than \$10,000 annually.

On March 1, 2016, SunLink closed the NGMC ED, thus no longer providing emergency room services for an indefinite period of time. It was the hospital's hope that this measure was a temporary one and the decision was forced upon the hospital due to financial reasons. This change allowed the hospital to maintain a financial position to continue its mission and provide key services to the Gilmer County service area. Hospital leadership had reviewed this proposal and confirmed that it would not create any change to its current licensure status. Additionally, the hospital leadership confirmed that it would not impact the hospital's accreditation status with The Joint Commission who accredits hospitals for Medicare participation.

The change did not affect Gilmer Nursing Home or the physicians based at the Medical Offices of North Georgia. Most of the hospital services remained the same, including outpatient and inpatient care, surgery, swing bed rehabilitation and nursing home care. Departments such as laboratory, radiology, and respiratory continued to operate and see patients with only a change in the hours that those services were available.



**North Georgia Medical Center**

Then three months later, in June 2016, SunLink Health System, Atlanta closed despite opposition from every government agency in Gilmer County and most of its residents. The reason for closing NGMC was that expenses exceeded revenue due to low volume, a high public-payer mix and a large increase in charity and indigent care. At that time, NGMC averaged about six inpatients for the past year. It appeared that Gilmer County residents wanted a hospital, but did not use it.



Piedmont Mountainside Hospital (PMH) in Jasper, a subsidiary of Piedmont Healthcare, located about 20 miles away, approached the state with a plan for a freestanding emergency department and simultaneously began negotiating with SunLink to lease hospital space and assume operation of the Ellijay hospital's ED, medical office building and community center. PMH would agree to lease the ED for 5 years and the medical offices for 10, if the state approved the freestanding ED letter of determination.

### **Piedmont Mountainside Hospital**

PMH had established its footprint in Ellijay back in 2008 when it opened a cardiac imaging center adjacent to Piedmont Heart Institute cardiologist group. In 2009, it opened an outpatient diagnostic center and in 2011 added MRI and a sleep center. In 2016, about 27 percent of PMH patients traveled from Gilmer County where NGMC was located so establishing a freestanding ED in Ellijay seemed practical. Despite PMH's commitment to the community, the uncertainty and public distrust generated by NGMC and an exodus of physicians and clinical staff leaving the NGMC facility left the community discouraged that they would not have access to necessary life-saving care.

Initially, PMH agreed to lease and operate the existing ED upon licensing and approval by the Georgia Department of Community Health, which was expected to be completed by September 1, 2016 with the Emergency Department re-opening by November 1, 2016. Piedmont Mountainside Hospital would also lease the Medical Offices at North Georgia Medical Center effective July 1, 2016.

On May 23, 2016, PMH received approval from the State Department of Health to move forward with the first freestanding ED in Georgia. Freestanding emergency departments operate as an extension of an ER in a hospital, providing 24-hour access to emergency physicians, nurses, labs and radiology technicians. They offer similar services as emergency rooms attached to the hospital, like moderate-complexity blood testing and advanced imaging, and they care for most emergent illnesses (heart attack, stroke and minor trauma).

PMH proposed its design and then ran a gauntlet of bureaucratic and legal obstacles as it crept toward approval. Since it was the first of its kind, multiple state and federal agencies had to conduct their own due diligence including:

- State Fire Marshall
- State Architect
- Certificate of Occupancy
- State Board of Pharmacy and Drug Enforcement Agency
- State Laboratory
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Administrative Contractor
- State Licensure

In addition, PMH had to respond to challenges from WellStar, a competing provider and the largest health system in Georgia as well as representatives from the cities of Ellijay and East

Ellijay joining an appeal process with Gilmer County commissioners who remained suspicious of the motives of the new operators. Though they had already approved moving forward in the appeals process, the Greater Gilmer Joint Development Authority took steps toward potential legal action and possible hiring of legal representation.

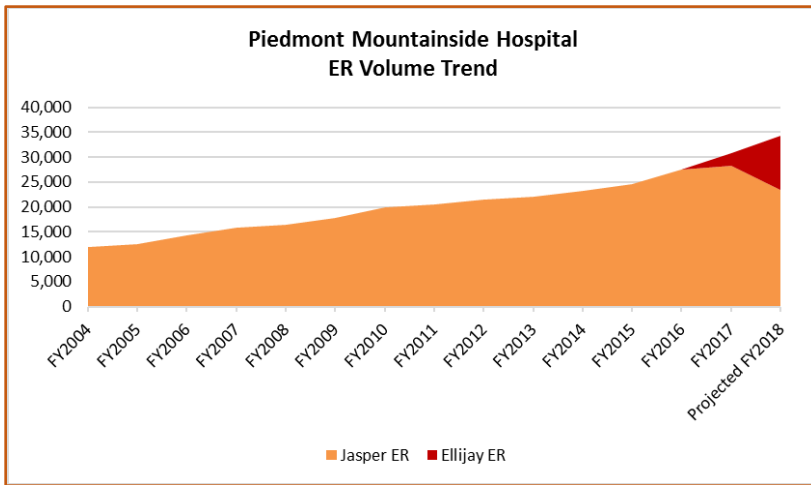


**David Ralston**

Piedmont reached out to Georgia state representative and Speaker of the House David Ralston (R-Blue Ridge), who was born in Ellijay and whose district includes Gilmer County and North Georgia Medical Center. He helped build trust and bridge the gap in communication between the county and the new operators.

It took 20 weeks to receive approvals from the agencies and clear any legal appeals. Consequently, renovation of the building and construction for the ED began in November – the original goal for the ED opening – and was completed 21 weeks later – 9 weeks for construction plus another 12 weeks for state and federal approvals.

On April 3, 2017, the emergency room opened for patients. It is known as Piedmont Mountainside Hospital Emergency Services. It is running 24/7, houses a CT scanner, X-ray, ultrasound, pharmacy and lab. In addition, Piedmont hired 35 new employees to staff the ER.



Since opening, the ED averages about 30 patients a day and in 6 months' time has seen over 5,000 emergency visits. Additionally, PMH is working collaboratively with the local Gilmer County EMS/ambulance service to ensure patients are transported to the most appropriate facility for their patient care needs.

As a community-focused hospital, PMH recognized their immediate need and acted to expand its

services in Gilmer County and deliver the same level of patient-centered care expected of the Piedmont name. Now, patients in Ellijay requiring admission or transfer will follow the same process as they would if they were entering PMH's emergency room in Jasper.