

The Outer Banks Hospital (OBH) is a 21-bed community hospital situated in Nags Head, North Carolina, in the state's Outer Banks region along the Atlantic Coast. Opened in 2002 and serving as the only full-service hospital in its region, OBH works with the local government and the community to ensure positive health outcomes for all area residents.

The hospital's collaboration with the Dare County Department of Public Health – in particular, as a contractor for the county's employee health and wellness plan – provides a potent example of how hospitals in rural areas can make the most of local partnerships to improve the health and well-being of the communities they serve.

Background

Senior Director of Operations Amy Montgomery spent 15 years working in the public health sector prior to joining OBH, including five years in Dare County. From the start, Montgomery believed that the potential for public health to partner with local physicians – which would bring both organizations' understanding of community health needs of specific populations to a new level – was an opportunity to seize. That opportunity arrived in 2010 when OBH and Dare County decided to formally partner as part of Healthy Carolinians of the Outer Banks (HCOB), a cross-sector consortium which brings together key stakeholders from across the Outer Banks to assess and improve



community health. "The Outer Banks is a unique place," Montgomery noted. "We recognized that working together would put our limited resources and dollars to better use, especially coming from a smaller area. But at the end of the day, we all really care about our community, and it's this shared goal that helps us work together so well."

Following its first community health assessment and for every assessment since, HCOB officials from OBH and Dare County hold public meetings to review

assessment results, gather feedback from community residents, discuss assessment recommendations, and call for the implementation of various health programs.

In addition to assessments, HCOB provides programs and resources to its region via task forces, founded by members and based on need. Its Dementia

and Alzheimer's Task Force, for example, works with local organizations and businesses to provide physician-informed educational opportunities, programs and resources to individuals living with dementia and Alzheimer's disease and their caretakers.

This physician-community connection evident in HCOB has helped strengthen the Outer Banks region's foundation in cross-sector collaboration. It also helped strengthen OBH's position to serve as Dare County's main provider for its employee wellness program.

Dare County's Employee Wellness Program

In 2015, OBH was contracted as Dare County's official partner to cover 1,200 lives for its employee wellness program, winning the contract over larger national competitors in the process.

This was in part due to OBH's edge in intimately understanding its local market. As a 90-mile long narrow strip of land, the Outer Banks region's geography presents its own unique challenges. For example, national competitors were not as uniquely aware as OBH of historical considerations for providing culturally competent care to residents of Hatteras, a geographically remote and underserved unincorporated village on Hatteras Island, at the Outer Banks' far southern end.

"We ultimately submitted a proposal for Dare County's wellness program because it was the right thing to do," noted Montgomery, who spearheaded the effort. "Based on our history with the community and our previous collaboration with the county through HCOB, we knew that the trust was already there – and that because of that knowledge and trust, we would be able to provide services that make a meaningful difference."

OBH designed its winning proposal with several key features in mind. In particular, Dare County's biggest issue was having to address rising premiums; staff were increasingly visiting the ED to avoid high co-pays. To address this, OBH introduced a convenience care clinic as part of its proposal. Similar to urgent care, OBH's convenience care clinic allows Dare County staff to go on-site to the clinic at nearby OBH on a set schedule, with physicians offering care to them with no co-pay required. This offering ultimately helped

employees reduce ED visits and more proactively address health issues that may have otherwise lingered.

OBH also provided a customized risk screening regimen to help improve county staff health outcomes. OBH's screening stratifies employees within high-, medium- and low-risk categories; those considered high risk receive one-on-one lifestyle management visits with a certified health coach. These visits have provided a remarkable impact on county health figures: Between 2017 and 2018, Dare County saw decreases in incidence among its staff of 23% for diabetes, 13% for high cholesterol and 4% for hypertension. In addition, among Dare County employees who were smokers in 2017, 26% reported no longer using tobacco in 2018.

"Dare County is extremely happy with our partnership with the Outer Banks Hospital," said Elizabeth Reilly, human resources director at OBH. "The employee wellness clinic has assisted Dare County in making our employees more aware of their health status.

Immediate awareness is key; it makes a difference. We are seeing full circle how attentive accountability to our employees' health is benefiting not only our employees but also the county through insurance claims and work productivity."

Impact

Since the employee wellness program's inception in 2016, Dare County has seen an 8% reduction in ED cost year-over-year for plan participants, a 10% reduction in avoidable ED encounters and a 5% reduction for inpatient medical admissions.

Moreover, the success of Dare County's programs



– particularly with preventive visits and smoking cessation rates – helped serve as a blueprint for the Center for Healthy Living, an OBH-sponsored community health center aimed at replicating the wellness plan’s success for all county residents. The center provides wellness services for area residents in coordination with primary care physicians, providing support for nutrition, fitness, chronic disease management and other areas.

The center also serves as a platform for collaboration with Dare County, as it runs some of its own public health programs from the center as well. Prevent T2, the department’s diabetes prevention program offered by trained lifestyle coaches using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s curriculum, is offered to all residents from OBH’s center. The Center for Healthy Living also serves as a key access point of information for the community for the Outer Banks Hospital and Dare County programs, news and events.

Lessons Learned

Throughout their working relationship, the Outer Banks Hospital and Dare County have learned the value of flexibility, being able to make adjustments based on feedback. For example, for its employee wellness program, OBH collected feedback from county staff to learn what more could be provided to help participants’ overall health and well-being. When they heard calls for more programming around mental health, OBH created a mental health program as a direct result of this feedback.

Perhaps most in line with the original vision, OBH’s partnerships with the county – both volunteer and contractual – have provided a crucial connection point between physicians and public health officials to keep each other better informed and thus working together to better tackle regional health issues.

Ronnie Sloan, president of OBH and another key player in OBH’s connection-building with Dare County, sees the relationship yielding communitywide benefits. “Our partnership with Dare County started as a creative and collaborative way to address the needs of our county employees,” Sloan said. “It has grown into a trusted relationship that is making a difference and moving the needle on wellness for this population in our community.”

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