Keeping Rural Hospitals Open

Besides providing health care, rural hospitals also generate millions of dollars annually within their communities.

When Drumright, Okla.’s, hospital closed in 2001, city officials sought help from OSU and its Oklahoma Office of Rural Health, which paid for a feasibility study and began community engagement.

A 2007 study by the OSU Cooperative Extension Service and the Office of Rural Health showed the hospital had provided 75 jobs with a $3.5 million payroll. In addition, the hospital created a secondary benefit resulting in 112 jobs and an annual payroll of $4.7 million, with $1.2 million of that spent in Drumright retail stores.

In the rural community of Prague, Okla., Joan Walters, a registered nurse and chief operating officer of Prague Community Hospital, also turned to OSU’s Center for Rural Health and its sponsored programs when the hospital faced hard times.

Both communities found help from OSU rural health experts William Pettit, D.O., associate dean for rural health at the OSU Center for Health Sciences, and Val Schott, director of the Oklahoma Office of Rural Health and Rural Health Policy and Advocacy for the Center for Rural Health.

They have an in-depth understanding of rural health needs. Schott, a former hospital administrator and a specialist on rural health policy, offered expertise tailored for the affected communities.

The Prague hospital needed a physician, and Pettit, who oversees OSU’s rural physician training, recruited OSU College of Osteopathic Medicine alumnus Darryl Jackson, D.O., to become the new doctor in the town of approximately 2,100 residents.

It was a perfect fit for Jackson, who grew up in rural Enos, Okla. He likes working in a small community, where patients who have to wait as he tends to an emergency take it in stride.

“They greet me with a smile and express concern about the other person,” Jackson says. “The appreciation you get is just great.”

Prague now has two OSU alumni as local physicians with the addition of Scott Fowler, D.O., who joined Jackson in practice this summer.

Prague’s new hospital facility will break ground this fall, the result of an effort that included an economic impact study to show what the community had to gain or lose in replacing the aging hospital. Feasibility studies, planning, expertise and support were part of the decision-making process. Then, local interests invested money in the project, and the Office of Rural Health helped find a buyer.

Walters says OSU’s help also made possible a national expert’s review of quality programs and training for staff, development and improvement of current quality programs, and access to ongoing training through webinars. Plans include restarting general surgery and other services lost through the years.

“If it were not for the Office of Rural Health, it would have been difficult to get where we are,” she says. “They helped us gain community support. They are our cheerleaders.”

The Drumright hospital is supported by its own revenue and is not a tax burden for the city.

“We didn’t have the volume to maintain a fee-for-service hospital,” Drumright hospital administrator Darrel Morris says. OSU assisted the community in qualifying as a critical access hospital and helped with the HUD mortgage insurance process to secure financing so construction could begin for the new hospital, which opened in 2005.

Assistance from OSU has extended far beyond the initial study and includes an additional economic impact study by OSU cooperative extension, he says, and an Office of Rural Health feasibility study.

The OSU Center for Rural Health also helped with grant applications to buy and implement electronic medical records systems for the hospitals in Drumright, Prague and two other rural communities.

OSU continually strives to ensure access to quality health care through programs for medical students, and OSU encourages students early on to practice in rural Oklahoma, Walters says.

“Oklahomans are definitely reaping the benefits of this.”

The rural community of Prague, Okla., now has two OSU alumni working locally as physicians. Scott Fowler, D.O., right, shown with his wife, Diane, and daughter, Isabel, joins Darryl Jackson, D.O., ’04, left, in family practice.