

## Letter to the Editor: Can a community exist with no hospital?

Written by By Rose Eason GallupARTS Executive Director  
Friday, 04 February 2022 05:27

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Dear Editor,

Is a community viable if it does not have a hospital? Sadly, for Gallup and McKinley County, this question, while rhetorical (the answer is clearly “no”), is not hypothetical. RMCH currently has no OBGYN and no neurologist on staff. (It’s been without an OBGYN for at least a month and without a neurologist for perhaps a year.) Is a hospital a hospital if it cannot provide care in all basic/major medical areas? Is a health care system a health care system if it is made up of LOCUM/traveling providers who are only available on an erratic and unreliable schedule?

Can a community retain and attract workers, families, retirees, and businesses if it is known as having an objectively broken healthcare system—for example, where the hospital’s call button system doesn’t work for months on end, and the administration’s solution is to have patients (people who are under duress or physically incapacitated) call for help by ringing handbells? Where the phones are down for two weeks at a time and your doctor can’t receive your calls or messages?

The unacceptably, inexcusably, and unsustainably bad (verging on collapse) situation at RMCH is something that should gravely and urgently concern all of us—our elected officials, governmental administrations, business owners, school boards and leaders, and everyone in between. It is an issue of, literally, life and death—both for individuals and the community. Beyond being just downright scary on a personal level for each and every Gallup/McKinley County resident (especially those without access to IHS), it is a fundamental issue of quality of

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life and economic development.

I felt a glimmer of hope in May 2020, when I learned I was pregnant with my second child and that Red Rock Clinic had a new OBGYN and would soon be adding two more. I was cared for by all three of these OBs over the course of my pregnancy and have never received a higher level of care at RMCH. I thought: This is great. RMCH has attracted top-tier talent, and we're turning the corner from the disastrous Conejo administration. I had been thinking of delivering this baby in Albuquerque, but I am now confident about receiving quality care in Gallup.

Fast forward a year, and, from what I've observed, we've gone from starting down the path to a 5-star institution to taking a nose dive into a 1-star, full-blown emergency. I cannot now in good conscience recommend Gallup as a place to live to any non-tribally enrolled person thinking about starting a family. No one can. (Just typing that makes me so deeply sad.)

When I was pregnant with my first child in 2019, there was a period of uncertainty about the Women's Health Clinic possibly having to close due to staffing shortages. At that time, the labor and delivery nurses stepped up, went above and beyond, and took on extra shifts to ensure that didn't happen. Last year, faced with similar patient safety issues, those same nurses were effectively required to resign/retire en masse as a last resort.

What changed? The CEO and the Board. It is evident from their actions—or lack thereof—that it is not a priority to ensure that our community has access to dedicated, professional, experienced, and talented providers or a first-class hospital. In the last year, they have more than missed the opportunity handed to them—in my opinion, they are not serving the hospital and our community.

Take the small example of the phone system: if hospital administration had patient care and community top of mind, they would ensure phone service to RMCH is never disrupted, let alone for weeks (as it has been recently). Or they would at least openly and honestly communicate disruptions to patients (which they have not).

We need a hospital Board that represents us and has a genuine, long-term interest in our community. Currently, only one voting member of the RMCH Board of Trustees lives in Gallup. And the Board is making moves to restructure the RMCH's C-suite so that hospital

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administrators do not directly report to it (or to any oversight apparatus based in Gallup/McKinley County or actually accountable to its constituents).

Our community is on the brink of losing its hospital. The time is now to demand that the administration and Board uphold their mission and obligation “to serve God by making a profound and lasting difference in the health and quality of life for all people in the community.”

By Rose Eason  
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