

Are changes on the horizon for RMCHCS?

Written by By Beth Blakeman Managing Editor
Friday, 15 October 2021 05:26



Doctors, nurses, and local residents filled the air with tearful and impassioned testimonials when they met to talk about patient care and employee treatment at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services at a community town hall Oct. 2.

The estimated 100 in-person attendees and 100 online attendees were joined by Mayor Louis Bonaguidi and Dist. 1 City Councilor Linda Garcia at the First United Methodist Church at 1800 Redrock Dr., #7000.

Prior to the event, RMCHCS interim CEO Don Smithburg made it clear that he would not be present and no one from the hospital would be, either. He said he considered the town hall to be a union-sponsored event, backed by the Union of American Physicians and Dentists, which promotes itself as a body that stands up for doctors.

The town hall was announced shortly after the hospital declared it would close its Women's Health Unit during October, which came after Dr. Hannah Palm, the hospital's last OB-GYN doctor, resigned.

Dr. Caleb Lauber, the former Chief of Medical Staff at RMCHCS, opened the meeting by explaining the importance of having a Native person on staff who could speak to Native patients in their own language — who could teach Native health care to new doctors —and who understood business. He said he possesses those skills, but when he showed an interest in becoming the CEO, he discovered he might have an adversary.

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Lauber said he believed he presented a threat to Smithburg by applying for the position of CEO. That's when his time on the board was cut short, ending in only about six months. Lauber said his termination was explained to him as being a "reduction in force." That account never satisfied him.

Meanwhile, he had patients to think about. He felt like he was abandoning them. Lauber was concerned about who would fill his role on the board, and as a Native doctor and teacher. He also expressed concern about the future of the HEAL Fellowship that trains OB-GYN doctors living in rural areas.

"Since the residency program requires an OB-GYN program to be functioning and the Women's Health Unit has closed, the residency program is in jeopardy," he said.

Overall, he considers the current state of the hospital as vulnerable to changes that will hurt the community at large.

"My concern when I was on the board was that he [Smithburg] wanted to close the hospital," Lauber said. "In the back of my mind I was thinking 'does he want to sell the hospital to some group that could buy this hospital for pennies on the dollar?'"

Those questions were followed by the next speaker, Rose Marie Cecchini, director of the Office of Peace, Justice and Creation working with Catholic Charities of the Gallup Diocese, who questioned the Community Hospital Corporation business model.

Cecchini recapped numerous news reports about safety issues, layoffs, and reprisals against staff members who spoke out about issues at the hospital. Then she said the "business first" model put in place by CHC in Plano, Tex., which currently manages RMCHCS, is not compatible with, and is detrimental to, the value system of patient care expressed in the hospital's mission statement, as found on its website.

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“The mission of RMCHCS is to serve God by making a profound and lasting difference in the health and quality of life for all people in the community,” the mission reads.

Fear, vindictiveness, reprisals, and disrespect were words that peppered the testimonials of former doctors, nurses, administrative staff members, and community residents throughout the gathering.

Dr. Lawrence Andrade, owner of Family Medicine Associates, said he was verbally attacked by Smithburg, who called him angry and bitter and said he was promoting lies and spreading malicious rumors because he [Smithburg] did not give Andrade hospital privileges.

Andrade asked if Smithburg and CHC are the best the community can get. He suggested creating a petition and getting 10,000 citizens to sign it, demanding the CHC, the hospital board, and Smithburg “get the heck out of our community.”

His brazen suggestion was met with applause.

“What’s the worst that can happen if we turn it over to a group of local doctors to run the hospital?” he asked. “I don’t think it can get any worse.”

Andrade said he felt that appeals to the County Commission were falling on deaf ears.

He wasn’t the only physician adamant about the hospital’s upper management. More doctors spoke up.

Dr. Chris Hoover, an RMCHCS urologist, said healthcare workers “need a voice” to help restore some balance to the hospital’s power dynamics.

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He pointed out that many RMCHCS medical assistants and other patient-centered workers, did not attend the meeting. As Hoover spoke about the their absence, someone in the audience called out, "They're afraid."

As the town hall came to a close, tearful proclamations by doctors who had resigned, and grateful patients, preceded the final announcement by UAPD organizing director Rachel Flores.

Flores called on everyone concerned about the hospital to contact their city councilors, county commissioners and the hospital board.

Smithburg was invited to respond to comments made at the town hall meeting. He did not reply by press time.

By Beth Blakeman
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