

Nehalem Valley Care Center Background

Part Three of the Nehalem Bay Health District's Facilities Assessment

As part of its ongoing strategic planning process the Nehalem Bay Health District board conducted the third of its planned informational meetings on July 11, 2018 in order to consider issues related to the Nehalem Valley Care Center in Wheeler, Oregon. A number of interested community members attended and participated in

The Care Center, which opened in 1983, is a skilled nursing facility providing essential post-operative and other rehab services, including physical, occupational and speech therapy and nursing for Tillamook and south Clatsop County. Most patients come to the facility after referrals from Providence Seaside or Tillamook General Hospital. Others are area residents wanting to recover close to home following specialized treatment in Portland.

The facility currently has a capacity of 46 patients but generally the census ranges between 25-28 patients. About two-thirds of patients live permanently at the Care Center and receive long-term care.

Care Center physical condition

The initial focus on the informational session was on the physical condition of the Care Center facility. Mark Remley, an owner and CEO of Aidan Health Services, Inc., the company that operates the Care Center as part of a LLC agreement with the health district, provided an overview, as did Kimberly Topazio, the resident administrator of the Care Center. Remley noted that the Care Center is unusual among similar facilities in that all patient accommodations are private rooms, many with sinks and toilets in the room. (Shower facilities are available in shared facilities.)

The facility would benefit, Remley said, from improved lighting. The patient call system is original to the building and no long state of the art. Additional upgrades could include new flooring, enhancements to the courtyard area that would make it more attractive and useful to patients and visitors, new furniture and fixtures and better air handling. There is no air conditioning in the facility. (Note: it was suggested by a member of the audience that the recent lighting upgrade at NCRD could be a model for improvements at the Care Center.)

Remley stressed that there are no current structural integrity issues with the building.

Remley said he does consider the Care Center to be, as the board has described it, "a vital community asset." He noted that in the recent past skilled nursing facilities in Tillamook, Lincoln City and Seaside have closed leaving the Care Center as the only facility of its kind on the coast between Astoria and Newport.

Staffing challenges

Like many health care facilities, particularly those in rural areas, the Care Center faces challenges attracting and retaining staff. At any give time 40-45 people are employed at the Center in various roles including housekeeping, laundry, kitchen, maintenance, records administration, social services and as registered nurses (RNs), licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and certified nursing assistants (CNAs). A variety of issues contribute to the staffing challenges, including development, training and retention of a workforce interested in providing the type of care offered at the Care Center and the availability of affordable housing in the area. Employees generally live outside of the immediate Wheeler area.

Remley noted that the Care Center pays wages that are competitive with similar facilities and that Medicaid reimbursement rates greatly limit what can be paid to employees. Care Center employees are offered regular, predictable employment with health care benefits. A member of the audience noted that any wage under \$20 per hour is likely not to constitute a “living wage” on the north coast.

Several specific suggestions were made that could have a positive impact on staffing or service offerings:

- Perhaps the Care Center could take CNA training to Tillamook and Seaside making it more convenient to attract candidates for the training.
- Investigate closer collaboration with schools in Tillamook to encourage students to understand and investigate the type of careers offered at the Care Center. The school district offers courses on health professions and medical exploring.
- Similarly explore involvement with the Intro to Caregiving course offered at Tillamook Bay Community College.
- Elder Place in Seaside is offering adult day care and respite services and these services might be appropriate at the Care Center.
- There is demand in northern Tillamook County for out patient rehabilitation services and those services are available at the Care Center, but the availability of those services are not widely known. A marketing strategy might be necessary to provide public information about the capabilities.

Future facility and service needs

The final portion of the informational session was devoted to the type of facility that could be needed in the future in Tillamook County. Participants were asked to focus on issues 15 to 20-years in the future. It was noted that the nature of senior care has charged substantially over recent decades with “today’s assisted living facilities being the nursing homes of 30 years ago.” More and more people see a Care Center-type environment as a facility of “last resort” with home care services and assisted living arrangements being generally more desirable. Several comments are made about the changing expectations of elder care.

At the same time, the Care Center is seeing higher numbers of patients who must rely on dependent care.

Several members of the audience noted that there are several efforts are underway in our communities to explore issues related to aging and end of life issues. Among ideas offered were these:

- A survey of the community to assess the types of services residents are interested in now and in the future.
- A simple brochure to describe various types of care available in the area.
- A forum with the Hoffman Center for the Arts aging program to provide information about Care Center services and understand public perceptions of the facility.
- Ongoing investigation of collaborative partnerships with hospitals, non-profits, elder service providers, etc.
- Investigation of whether the Care Center might offer assisted living and/or memory care services.

The board thanked members of the community for their participation and encouraged them to remain engaged in the district's strategic planning process.
