

Hospitals prepare to prove community benefit worth

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Steve Petty (Photo by April Wilkerson)

OKLAHOMA CITY – In less than two years, not-for-profit hospitals must start proving the efficacy of what they’re doing for the community outside their walls in addition to the care they provide inside.

That part of health care reform is taking effect in 2013; hospitals that don’t comply can be fined \$50,000 per facility. Hospital leadership is gearing up for extra paperwork and discernment about their outreach and its effectiveness.

The concept of community benefit – such as hospitals sponsoring health screenings and support groups – isn’t new. But a new graduate-level certification program is helping hospital leaders better understand what will be considered community benefit

under the new law.

Steve Petty, corporate director of community health improvement for Integris Health, recently earned a graduate certificate in community benefit from the St. Louis University of Public Health. He is one of the first five in the country to receive the certification.

“We can’t keep health care inside the walls; we have to be out in the community doing it,” Petty said. “This certification helps prepare me and hopefully Integris for what’s coming down the road with the IRS regulations.”

By 2013, all not-for-profit hospitals have to perform a community needs assessment to find out what issues are specific to their area. Integris, which has hospitals in 14 Oklahoma counties, must perform 14 assessments, Petty said.

However, it’s not just gathering data about a county; it’s working with public health officials and doing focus groups. Each facility must then come up with a strategic plan addressing problems, state what it will do to fix them, then show measurable outcomes.

Hospitals may have a number of outreach programs already in place, but now they will be required to show that they’re working.

“Not-for-profit hospitals will be held more accountable for why they are tax-exempt,” Petty said. “We have to prove we’re making a difference to keep that tax-exempt status. We’re already doing a lot in the community, and I’m very proud of that, but are we doing something that will affect those health indicators?”

In the next few months, Integris will start community needs assessments at each of its facilities. The next year will be spent putting together plans that address at least the top three to five negative health indicators in each area. Petty said Integris will be looking for evidence-based best practices to address problems like obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure.

The process is likely to be tougher at Integris’ smaller hospitals in places like Madill and Seminole, where there are higher numbers of uninsured and underinsured residents, Petty said.

Integris will probably keep many of its programs, but it may need to change them a bit to

meet Internal Revenue Service requirements, Petty said. The changes will hinge on whether the program benefits the community or the hospital. For example, a health care screening in a low-income community would meet the requirements, but a health screening in an upscale mall for marketing purposes would not. Health screenings also require follow-up – referring patients to Integris' free clinic or finding help for them another way.

"We're still doing a lot, but we'll be refocusing what we're doing and trying to find those health components where we can show we're making a difference," he said. "It really makes you evaluate what you're doing."

Petty said the new law should create more prevention and wellness programs. The goal is to keep more people out of the emergency room.

Craig Jones, president of the Oklahoma Hospital Association, said the community benefit certification will likely be something that hospitals consider on a case-by-case basis. Larger hospital systems typically designate one or two people for community benefit work, but at smaller hospitals, the increased work will be another hat that someone wears.

"It's been a long-standing issue that not-for-profit hospitals need to be able to properly convey the community benefits they are providing; the (new law) raises the bar in terms of the nature of the reporting," Jones said. "The kind of additional training and certification that Steve has will be a great asset."

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