

WHY FORM THE HEALTH CARE TEACHING COUNTY PARTNERSHIP?

Insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. - Albert Einstein

When you come to a fork in the road, take it. - Yogi Berra

WHAT IS THE CONCEPT: Modeled after the idea of a “teaching hospital” but in a community, rather than in an institutional setting, the notion of a Health Care Teaching County proposes a collaborative approach in which the county’s citizens and health professionals along with UA faculty/students collaborate to build an enhanced and sustainable model of health care delivery for the County. Elements of the HCTC might happen across many settings in Pickens County, including the hospital, clinics, social and health care agencies and others.

ELEMENTS: At a minimum, there will need to be

- An initial needs assessment and a prioritization process followed by initial planning;
- A basic infrastructure (eg office space, some initial staff, etc.);
- A process to agree on, develop and implement priority projects;
- A communications plan;
- A component to evaluate the success and impact of projects.

Pickens County citizens and its health care providers should drive the priorities, with assistance and resources from University of Alabama faculty and students. A successful HCTC could become a model for other rural counties

What’s potentially in this for Pickens County?

- Infusion of “intellectual capital” with new ideas, new approaches in health care, and infectious enthusiasm
 - For example, from the fields of Medicine, Nursing, Social Work, Nutrition, Health Education and other non-health care fields such as Law, Business, Marketing and Communications.
- Expansion of health care services in the county, often at low or little cost, through faculty and their students,
- Exposure to young health professionals for recruitment purposes
- Access to expertise of UA faculty
- Access to expanded telemedicine and tele-education services through UA
- Improved access to funding opportunities (eg, grants)
- The potential to “get on the radar” for economic expansion opportunities because of this innovation
- Development of a health care services network for services not offered in Pickens county

What’s in this for The University of Alabama?

- Opportunity to fulfill UA’s mission of service and economic development, within the immediate impact area of the University
- Opportunity to work towards CCHS’s mission of improved health of the population
- Opportunity to partner with and learn from motivated citizens on solving real world problems that are prevalent across Alabama and the US
- Service learning and practical rural learning opportunities for students, all within a short distance of UA
- Instructional and scholarship opportunities for faculty
- Possible future jobs for students
- Possible grant opportunities for faculty based on specific project proposals in concert with Pickens County

THE HEALTH CARE TEACHING COUNTY

The Concept – June 2015

An innovative partnership is proposed with Pickens County, its health care providers, the community, and The University of Alabama to create a “Health Care Teaching County” (HCTC). This partnership aims to sustain a struggling healthcare system by creating strong ties for innovation between UA and the County. The long term intent is to impact the county’s ability to retain families, attract jobs, and improve the health of its citizens. Together, Pickens County citizens and UA faculty and students will prioritize needs, identify and implement projects that offer solutions, learn together, tap into the experience and insight of the citizens of the county, and build a new model of health care.

Challenges: Rural communities face significant challenges to sustainability and growth. Along with education and jobs, health care is essential to sustain rural communities. Population characteristics of rural communities predict the need for greater availability of health care services are prevalent in rural communities, where people in general are older, sicker, and poorer. Yet maintaining adequate health services and professional workforce there has been a decades-long struggle. This predicament is intensified for Alabama, where 41% of the population lives in rural areas versus 19% of the entire country. Pickens County is regarded as 100% rural and, at 50th in health outcomes amongst Alabama’s 67 counties, is one of the least healthy counties in the state. Health is intimately tied to factors called “social determinants” which both contribute to and reflect this status. As examples: the per capita income in the county is \$17,000; a third of the population lives below the poverty level; high school graduation rates are below the state average; retail sales per capita are half the statewide average. Addressing the health of a population must therefore look not only at traditional health care services but also social support services and economic development.

Hospitals in rural areas historically are the lynch pin around which health services and provider communities have been built. But rural hospitals are struggling to survive. Since 2011 in Alabama, rural hospitals have closed in Florala, Elba, Clanton, Hartselle, Thomasville, and Roanoke, while others have cut services, notably obstetrical care. Whereas 46 of Alabama’s 55 rural counties offered local obstetrics in 1980, by 2011 only 19 counties did. Maintaining a traditional model of the full service, small rural hospital, particularly in the context of lower reimbursement and lack of Medicaid expansion, appears to not be sustainable. Pickens County Medical Center (PCMC) epitomizes these struggles. The county-owned hospital in Carrollton, less than an hour from UA, has provided inpatient/outpatient/emergency services for the county’s 20,000 residents as a major employer, at one point with more than 300 employees. But financial struggles led to layoffs and reduced services, with closure seemingly imminent at one point.

Health Care Teaching County (HCTC): In the context of these struggles, conversations between Pickens County physicians, citizens of the county, and health professional faculty of the University ensued over the prior 18 months about the future of health care in Pickens County. It was clear early on that new ideas and models were needed. Building on the long-standing teaching relationships between some of the Pickens County physicians and the UA College of Community Health Sciences (CCHS), a novel notion has developed – the Health Care Teaching County. The concept of a “teaching hospital” is widely understood as a facility/organization where health professional education and excellent health care take place, typically in an urban University-affiliated or -run academic teaching center (AHC). Despite remarkable achievements, the tertiary/urban focus of AHCs has not served the needs of rural health care and its health workforce well. CCHS on the other hand was founded 43 years ago to train physicians in a community setting and aiming to produce family doctors, particularly for rural Alabama, and to begin to address needs from the community perspective. CCHS has developed community-based education programs and approaches that recruit, admit, and prepare individuals more likely to enter and become leaders in primary care and/or rural practice.

Could the HCTC notion, as an extension of the community-oriented concept underlying CCHS, be a means to sustain health care and improve the health of the citizenry of Pickens County? Could it also provide rural, “real world” health care training venues for UA students better than classroom or tertiary health care setting experiences? A HCTC relationship could immerse health professional students into the county, linking them to providers. It could expose students to patients and their needs and in turn benefit patients from the students’ time, energy and ability as an extension of the county’s providers. The concept could include other students, for example from business or communications, to work side-by-side with hospital administration and county business leaders on improving health care management and marketing practices. Among the potential are enhanced tele-education services for providers and citizens with support of UA Continuing Studies; or a new law clinic where law students help implement new elderly law services; or expanded social and mental health services due to the presence of social work and psychology students; or nutrition counseling or health education services. This partnership offers the potential to bring new intellectual capital and energy to Pickens County while providing real world training venues for UA students, invigorating the county and its providers, growing the county’s health professional workforce, reinventing and sustaining quality care, and ultimately improving health and the economy for the citizens of Pickens County.

**The University of Alabama/ Pickens
Health Care Teaching County Partnership
Progress Report February 2016**

HCTC Partnership Summary:

An innovative partnership is in development between Pickens County citizens and The University of Alabama (UA) to create a "Health Care Teaching County" (HCTC). This partnership aims to sustain a struggling healthcare system by creating strong ties for innovation between UA and the County. It envisions UA students immersed in the county, overseen by UA faculty and County citizens, linked to health care providers to enhance health care, education and social support services, and benefiting from students' brightness and energy. The long term goal is intended to improve the health of its citizens and there by impact the county's ability to retain families and attract jobs.

Importance of the HCTC Partnership:

Rural communities, like Pickens County, face significant challenges to sustainability and growth. Along with education and jobs, health care is essential to sustain rural communities. Population characteristics of rural communities, where people in general are older, sicker, and poorer than non-rural areas, predict the need for greater availability of health care services. This is intensified in Alabama, where 41% of the population lives in rural areas versus 19% of the US. Pickens County is regarded as 100% rural, and at 41st in health outcomes amongst Alabama's 67 counties, is one of the least healthy counties in the state. Health is intimately tied to factors called "social determinants" which both contribute to and reflect the status. Examples include: median household income is \$32,214; a third of the population lives below the poverty level; high school graduation rates are below the state average; retail sales per capita are half the statewide average. A "big picture" approach to health must therefore look not only at traditional health care services but also social support services and economic development.

Partnership Activities:

Following developmental discussions in 2014 and early 2015 between a small group of UA and Pickens County leaders, a project steering committee, consisting of citizens representing the population of Pickens County and representatives from UA, began meeting in September 2015, to assess the direction and opportunities for development of the HCTC. Utilizing funding support from the Alabama State Legislature, the steering committee has developed and is executing an implementation plan that will be the next stage in development of the HCTC partnership.

The HCTC Partnership Implementation Plan has three components:

1. Create a basic infrastructure for administrative support by hiring a project coordinator/community liaison to facilitate overall daily program development and oversight for the partnership activities. This individual will be employed through UA, however will be based in Pickens County. The coordinator position is being posted in February and will be filled by spring 2016. The project coordinator will bestow the following qualities: program administration abilities, strong interpersonal communication skills, understanding of and respect for rural life and its values, knowledge of Pickens Co., administrative skills and coordination of project evaluation. A nursing, social work, public health, or other human services or health management related background is ideal for an individual in this role.

2. Pickens County Pilot Project Grants applications are currently available to both Pickens County community members and UA faculty and their students, working in collaboration with a Pickens County entity, to propose and develop projects/initiatives that address an identifiable health issue/priority within Pickens County. Award amounts of up to will \$25,000 for a one-year project will be available. Projects are expected to have a short term initial focus with potential for long term continuance and impact, will be reviewed as received and initiated as soon as possible but must start by summer 2016, and must have an evaluation component.
3. Pickens County Health and Services Fellowship applications are currently available for recent UA graduates, or UA students graduating in May 2016 who are seeking an opportunity to work in a health-related capacity (health in the broadest sense) in a community setting. The one-year service experience has the goal of providing the fellows practical, community based experience in which they can apply their education and commitment to service. A majority of the individual's time would be spent working in the community with a portion in a seminar series on health and public policy, leadership, and social determinants of health. Fellows will participate in concluding events, including an evaluation of the fellowship impact, at year-end. This "gap year" program will both provide resources to Pickens County and the projects of the Partnership, but will also give new graduates practical experience in community engagement, and thereby improve their preparation for graduate study and work life.

Future Steps for the Partnership:

Sustainable funding and leadership for the projects will be crucial for the success of this partnership in addressing health related needs in Pickens County. Annual funding will also provide opportunities for new projects in the future, and allow the steering committee to leverage state funding into external grant requests that can push the partnership beyond the initial implementation plan. The community-academic partnership being piloted in the HCTC has potential to be a model for other struggling rural counties within Alabama and surround states who face the same scarcity of health care and economic development resources, and a sense of despair about the prospects for a brighter future.