

North Adams hospital, affiliates to close

Friday is last day; 530 to lose jobs

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Berkshire Eagle

NORTH ADAMS — North Adams Regional Hospital, the Northern Berkshire Visiting Nurses Association & Hospice of Northern Berkshire, and three medical practices will close on Friday, leaving 530 full- and part-time employees without jobs and thousands of patients with no immediate health care answers.

Trustees of the parent company, Northern Berkshire Healthcare, approved the resolution.

As explanation, the company statement said, "The resolution was approved in response to NBH's worsening financial status." The hospital had emerged from bankruptcy in June 2012, but has been on rocky financial footing since.

The news was announced to employees on Tuesday afternoon, according to a spokesman.

"In the six years that I have been on the board, we have investigated every possible avenue and exhausted all options as we searched for a way to continue operating the hospital and its affiliates," said Julia Bolton, chairwoman of the trustees, in a statement.

"Board members, management, physicians, and employees have worked together with dedication and commitment to prevent this outcome. But now, given our finances and the daunting challenges that small rural community hospitals are facing in this healthcare environment, we can no longer continue."

Employees will be laid off and the company said it will provide assistance in filing for unemployment benefits.

The Northern Berkshire Healthcare Physicians Group, which is operated by Northern Berkshire Healthcare, includes Northern Berkshire Family Medicine, Northern Berkshire OB/GYN, and Northern Berkshire General Surgery, all in North Adams.

"The implications of this decision are far-reaching, but our primary concern is for our patients," said Timothy Jones, the president and CEO. "We are working tirelessly to ensure a smooth transition to other care providers including other hospitals in the region."

The hospital's Emergency Department will close at 10 a.m. on Friday. Residents may seek emergency care at Berkshire Medical Center in Pittsfield and Southwestern Vermont Medical Center in Bennington, Vt. Patients of Northern Berkshire Family Medicine and the VNA & Hospice of Northern Berkshire will be transitioned to other practices and agencies through Friday, April 4.

"North Adams Regional Hospital opened 129 years ago in 1885, and as an institution we have served the people of this area with dedication and pride," See **HOSPITAL**, page 3A

Article Continued Below

[See HOSPITAL on Page A03](#)

From the Front

Hospital will be big economic loss

HOSPITAL, from page 1A Jones said. "Many of those who work here have served our patients for decades, and today's news is a shock. We wish it could be different."

According to Stephen Sheppard, economics professor at Williams College, the result of longer travel time for emergency treatment will likely result in an increased mortality rate.

He noted he and some students are in the midst of conducting a study on the affect of treatment location to mortaility rates.

"We find that an increase in distance does harm health and there is increased rise of mortality, he said.

He also checked on the economic data, and determined that the loss of the hospital would "impose a hit on the Northern Berkshire economy of \$96.4 million annually, and result in the loss of another 230 jobs in other areas."

David Schildmeir, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Nurses Association, said there is some question if the company had followed state regulations regarding the closing of hospitals.

"The board of trustees might want to walk away, but the nurses who care for the patients don't and we're committed to do whatever we can to save the hospital or at least insure a safe transition," he said.

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All hands on deck in hospital closing

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Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — Politicians, lawmakers and union leaders spent Wednesday scrambling to resolve the fate of North Adams Regional Hospital and four affiliated organizations before they close for good on Friday.

Tuesday's announcement that Northern Berkshire Healthcare's trustees planned to close NARH, the local visiting nurse and hospice group and three medical practices within three days, a decision that would cost North Berkshire 530 jobs, appeared to have caught politicians and union leaders somewhat off-guard.

It was unclear Wednesday exactly what direction officials were planning to follow, but several options were being discussed.

They included the possibility of legal action, a thorough review of the hospital's financial situation, the filing of emergency legislation, possible government intervention, and the clarification of discussions between the financially strapped NBH and Berkshire Health Systems, the county's largest employer.

A professor of Policy and Health Management at the Boston University School of Public Health also has called on Gov. Deval Patrick to declare a public health emergency that would allow the state to take control of NARH.

"We're working on every option that we can think of," said state Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield, "including conversations with the (Patrick) administration, the (state) Attorney General's office and others.

"The first goal is to keep the hospital open any way we can so we preserve access to emergency services, and to the extent possible to preserve services beyond emergency services, and jobs."

With only a day left before NARH is scheduled to close, Downing said the discussions are being conducted with "a sense of urgency." But Downing said lawmakers also want to resolve the situation permanently so that it doesn't flare up again.

"There is a desire to make sure that we don't claim to have solved the problem only to be back here again in a week or two," he said. "We want to do everything to solve this and do it right."

State Rep. Gailanne Cariddi, D-North Adams, said she met with Downing on Wednesday morning and that they discussed the possibility of filing emergency legislation to keep NARH open.

"I'm working hand-in-hand with him to put together the right language that we can bring forward to keep the doors open at the hospital," she said.

Cariddi said the options available to lawmakers depend on "what the true situation of the hospital is," including a clarification of the discussions that she said have taken place between BHS and NBH.

"Is there a merger? Is there no hope for a merger?," she said. "The light at the end of the tunnel" appeared to be some sort of "cooperation" between the two Berkshire County health organizations, Cariddi said.

Speaking at an unrelated event on Wednesday, Patrick said NBH's decision to close the hospital was "something that I'm very concerned about," and that his office had been working with the state Department of Public Health "all weekend" to "try and find a solution."

"We thought we had one right up until the point that the board of the hospital made the decision they made here," Patrick said.

In a statement, state Attorney General and North Adams native Martha Coakley said she is "deeply concerned" with the rapid pace of the hospital's closure, and that her office is considering "all legal options" that would prevent both NARH from closing and maintain access to health services.

"North Adams is my hometown, and I know how important North Adams Hospital is to the communities in the area," Coakley said. "I am deeply concerned by the rapid pace of this closure and am working with all parties — the governor, the local delegation, the Department of Public Health and others — to address this.

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Editorial

Our friends, family and neighbors to the south

Despite the political and psychological implications of the state border, Bennington County and Berkshire County, Mass., are adjacent to each other and similar in many ways, ranging from rural landscape to a growing problem with heroin and opioid abuse.

There are many shared economic and cultural interests and many of us have family ties across the border.

So the sudden announcement that North Adams Regional Hospital (NARH) and its related services under the umbrella of Northern Berkshire Healthcare would be closing on Friday was a big story in the Banner. More than 10,000 people saw the link to the article on the Banner's Facebook page, and the link was shared a whopping 78 times. Several commenters spoke of family members among the more than 530 full- and part-time workers expected to lose their jobs.

One of the nurses who took care of the writer of this editorial when he was hospitalized in North Adams after an operation was from North Bennington. Even the chairwoman of the Northern Berkshire Healthcare Board of Trustees, Julia Bolton, has strong ties to Vermont, having once served as vice president of operations and chief nursing officer at Southwestern Vermont Medical Center here in town.

In southeastern Bennington County, the impact of closing the North Adams hospital on people in Stamford and Readsboro — much closer to North Adams Regional than to SVMC — remains to be seen. Experience at the paper tells us that those injured in car accidents in those areas are most often either taken to NARH or, if critically injured, flown completely out of the area to a major trauma center.

Needless to say, the loss of 530 jobs by people living in Massachusetts, Vermont and even New York will have a major negative impact on the regional economy.

Our sister paper, the Berkshire Eagle, brought up many important points in its Wednesday editorial about the closing: Yes, it was common knowledge for years that the hospital was in financial difficulty, but why such a sudden closing when 60 days' notice is required by law? This will be for officials in Massachusetts to work out.

From the Bennington County perspective, we are pleased, as our article in this issue states, that Southern Vermont Health Care, the parent company of Southwestern Vermont Medical Center (SVMC), is preparing for an influx of patients from Berkshire County, both emergency and otherwise. SVHC leaders spent Wednesday meeting with administrators from the Massachusetts hospital to discuss specific patients' needs. If the closing in North Adams is indeed final, the possible addition of specialists and other medical personnel from northern Berkshire would be a fine addition to care offered here.

A hospital in existence since 1885, NARH and its parent corporation are, as the Eagle states, facing a "plight, one that is shared by small community hospitals across the nation, (which) exposes all of the weaknesses in our profit-based health care system. They are expected to cut their prices for medical services at the same time they are squeezed on government funding. Hospitals like NARH that are in low-income areas are hugely dependent on Medicaid funding, which an increasingly mean-spirited Congress is determined to reduce. NARH has cut departments in recent years and made other cost-saving measures in a bid to stay solvent."

This raises issues for another day, but we think that adequate medical care facilities are a basic component of civilized society. We wish our neighbors in northern Berkshire the best of luck in maintaining quality medical services in and for their community. We are grateful for the presence of Southern Vermont Health Care and SVMC, but we need to remain mindful of the ever-changing and precarious nature of the healthcare environment today.

- Mark E. Rondeau

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