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It's official: Backus joins Hartford HealthCare network

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State OKs document that allows hospitals to form partnership

Norwich — The merger affiliation between Backus Corp. and Hartford HealthCare has been approved by the state, making the William W. Backus Hospital part of the network's "east region."

The state approval of the Certificate of Need that allows the two groups to form a partnership was announced Wednesday.

"To improve coordination and access in eastern Connecticut, Hartford HealthCare will establish a newly defined East Region comprised of system members in New London and Windham counties," a press release from Hartford HealthCare said. "This will include Backus and Windham Hospital, which is already a Hartford HealthCare member."

The network also includes Natchaug Hospital in Mansfield.

The Backus board of directors began seeking a partner in 2011 and announced in February 2012 that a letter of intent to join the Hartford HealthCare network had been signed. In the interim, the two boards have been negotiating how the partnership would work and awaiting state approval.

"Our board's top priority has been to create a sustainable system of care," Backus board Chairman Anthony Joyce said in a press release, "one that provides patients with greater access, offers more seamless transitions and strengthens key services. In every way, this affiliation will help us create that coordinated model."

Among the provisions in the agreement, Hartford HealthCare agreed to create a Preventive Medicine Institute at Backus, which would focus on helping residents lead healthier lives and avoid developing chronic conditions.

Backus spokesman Shawn Mawhiney said the new partnership will include a \$200 million commitment to develop and implement a strategic health care plan for the entire region served by the partners. Backus recently completed a community health assessment that generated data on health care problems and trends, with obesity and related health issues, mental illness and access to preventive care as some areas that need to be addressed.

The data also includes how many people come to the hospital emergency center for illnesses that could be managed with preventive treatment.

"For example, asthma, if you manage it properly, you shouldn't need to end up in emergency," Mawhiney said.

The goal is to complete the strategic plan within 120 days from Wednesday, Mawhiney said. The plan must be approved by the boards of directors of both Backus and Hartford HealthCare. If new facilities are proposed as a result, those might need state approval as well, he said.

The partners also announced creation of a \$3 million fund for medical staff development to be replenished as needed. The fund would help recruit and retain top physicians, Mawhiney said.

The agreement also calls for expanding many specialized medical services already offered at Backus, including cancer treatment services in eastern Connecticut, improving cardiac care services with local specialists, neonatal care with access to specialists and establishing an extensive primary care network.

While those services would be enhanced at Backus, local patients also would have "seamless transition" to

Affiliation agreement highlights

- The partnership approved by the state Office of Health Care Access makes The William W. Backus Hospital a member of the Hartford HealthCare network, which also includes Windham Hospital and Natchaug Hospital in Mansfield.

- Backus President and CEO David Whitehead will become CEO of the Hartford HealthCare East Region, including both Backus and Windham hospitals, and will become a senior vice president of Hartford HealthCare.

- Windham Hospital CEO Stephen W. Larcen will become senior vice president of Hartford HealthCare's Behavioral Health Network and will continue as president and CEO of Natchaug Hospital.

- Backus and Windham hospitals will retain their names, identities, medical staffs and separate hospital and affiliate licenses.

- The Backus hospital board of directors remains, with the addition of two members from the Hartford HealthCare system board. Two Backus board members will be added to the Hartford board.

- All funds donated to either hospital will be used as the donors intended in their respective services areas.

specialists at Hartford HealthCare if they needed to transfer there.

The new partnership also is committed to keeping the Life Star helicopter stationed permanently at Backus and maintaining the hospital's trauma center. Mawhiney said Backus always had been dependent on state funding to keep the Life Star program viable, and this partnership eliminates that concern.

"Every couple years, there would be concerns that funding from the state would no longer be available," he said. "This would be a commitment that no matter what happens at the state level, we would have a Life Star and trauma center."

Backus hospital President and CEO David Whitehead, who now will head both Backus and Windham hospitals and will become a senior vice president of Hartford HealthCare, called the approval "a great day for patients in eastern Connecticut," and said it would bring sustainable health care services to the region for the future.

"Our goal throughout this very deliberate process has been to create far more coordinated care at every level for our patients and their families," Whitehead said. "This is a giant step forward toward achieving that vision."

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