

Area's health is foundation's focus

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Fund formed by hospital's sale will be tapped to promote Pottstown's wellness

POTTSTOWN – What do area residents most need to get healthier and stay that way?

That is the essential question the newly formed Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation will tackle as it opens a new vista on the area's health care landscape.

It is a landscape filled with residents who have expressed intense interest in how the area will benefit from the foundation formed by transformation of their non-profit community hospital to a for-profit health care system.

Formed on July 1, 2003, by the sale to Tennessee-based Community Health Systems of Pottstown Healthcare Corp., parent of Pottstown Memorial Medical Center, the foundation is armed with about \$65 million in assets.

Proceeds from the investment of that money will be parceled out in the years to come to promote health in the area.

But where to start?

Well, before you head off in any direction, it's best to know where you are, according to the foundation's five-member executive committee.

That's why it decided the next step in building the map toward a healthy lifestyle requires that it identify the areas where improvement is most needed.

Then it must determine the best route to getting help and education where it's most needed, the committee's members said during a recent interview.

"We want to engage the full spectrum of the community," said foundation president Milton D. Martyny. "All ages, all economic levels, all ethnicities."

"We have no predisposition about what the community's needs are," said Charles F. Palladino, the foundation's secretary.

To ensure that level of thoroughness, the executive board is in the process of selecting a consultant who specializes in health needs assessment studies.

The choice of consultants has been narrowed to a few, Martyny said, adding that the assessment would start in the fall.

After a year of study, which will include questionnaires, surveys, examination of government data and even focus groups, the foundation will receive recommendations about where to focus its efforts.

Then will come the hard part, said Ted A. Drauschak, the executive committee's vice president.

"We're going to count on the consultant to make recommendations but that's where things are going to get difficult, prioritizing the use of the funds," he said.

One of the deciding factors will be for the committee to evaluate "where our help will have the most tangible impact," Drauschak said.

"We're not going to cure cancer here, but what we can do with this money is use it to have a tangible impact on the community," he said.

For example, in Easton, where CHS purchased a hospital in 2001, the foundation formed from that sale was instrumental in the formation of the Northampton County Health Department.

While Montgomery County has long had a health department, the foundation wants to have the same kind of broad-based impact on improving the area's wellness.

And to be sure the money is not used to line anyone's pockets, the foundation intends to restrict eligibility to federally certified non-profit organizations within 10 miles of the hospital.

"It's easy to spend money," Drauschak said. "We want to make sure it's accomplishing something."

That's why when the foundation begins to accept proposals for health-related projects in the community, it will have strict accountability standards about objectives and achievements, Palladino said.

"We're going to have specific objectives for the kinds of things we want to support," Palladino said, "and we're going to have a procedure to measure the benefits of an initiative after a year or so."

And to ensure that the foundation's money is available into perpetuity, the principal will be managed very conservatively, said D. Scott Detar, an accountant and the foundation's treasurer.

"We want this to last a lifetime, and then some, and not get used up in the next 10 years," Detar said.

Another crucial element to the foundation's success, Martyny said, will be the hiring of an executive director.

"Our search just started," Martyny said. "Remember, we're only about a month old."

The search will be conducted by a nominating committee and will include a rigorous interview process, Martyny said.

He added that the entire board of directors is "very excited about the significant positive impact we see this having on the health of the community."

His most fervent wish is for residents to learn from the foundation's efforts how to avoid disease.

"Health and wellness education focuses on preventing illness, not treating it," Martyny said. "Through education, members of the community can learn to adopt a healthy lifestyle that will make them feel better and enjoy life even more," he said.

"A healthy lifestyle often results in a longer life and better health in old age," Martyny said.