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Becoming a Community-Centered Board

Hospital trustees face a broad array of complex challenges in their continual quest to meet the critical health care needs of their communities. Too often, trustees become so consumed with the organizational issues and challenges that they lose sight of the need to consistently and forcefully connect in meaningful ways with their communities.

With growing scrutiny of the "community benefit" provided by hospitals, hospital boards have a unique opportunity to ensure that their organizations consistently engage in meaningful ways with a broad range of community stakeholders. Although a lack of trust in America's hospitals in some quarters may be primarily attributed to wrongdoing by a few hospitals, the problem is compounded by a lack of effective action and community engagement.

Hospital boards of trustees must not ignore this growing community trust challenge. Most Americans don't understand how hospitals are organized and managed, while even fewer still understand and appreciate the many challenging forces that are impacting local hospitals today. Instead, they tend to rely on personal experiences, and the opinions and beliefs of the media, friends and associates to shape their viewpoints about their local health care system. Trustees should actively engage their organizations in meaningful community partnerships, lead the design of community health improvement initiatives, and engage in community dialogues that promote the hospital's efforts and demonstrate the hospital's genuine interest in the health care needs and challenges of the community.

The Business Case for Community Health Initiatives

It's simple: strengthening community relationships and implementing initiatives to improve the community's health is the right thing to do for hospitals' patients, families and communities. In addition to helping hospitals fulfill their community-focused missions and visions, community health

initiatives provide several significant business-strengthening benefits, including:

- Credibility and leverage in representation and advocacy;

- The potential to increase market share;

- Development of allies to address common challenges;

- Creation of new partnership opportunities;

- Foundation fundraising;

- Strengthened support and public trust for the hospital and its efforts;

- Increased awareness of hospital challenges and understanding of the hospital's commitment to addressing community needs;

- Strengthened employee morale and sense of purpose; and

- Preservation of not-for-profit hospitals' tax-exempt status as the community benefit provided by hospitals and health systems becomes clear and measurable.

The Need for Trustee Leadership and Involvement

Hospital trustees are trusted leaders in their communities. Trustees also have a unique and powerful role as key communicators of the benefit provided by their hospital. Because they are volunteers, they are viewed as unbiased impartial protectors and stewards of the hospital's cherished mission, values and vision.

A board emphasis on the importance of improving community health sets the stage for hospital leaders, employees and the medical staff to develop strategies for community health improvement. To effectively lead their organization in building and strengthening community health, boards must:

1. **Define the "community" (or communities)** the hospital serves, creating a focus for the community health improvement initiatives, and enabling measurement of the impact and success of the hospital's efforts.

2. **Develop partnerships** with other health care providers and community organizations that can bring diverse resources to the table.

3. **Develop a shared community health mission**, values, vision and plan, including specific goals and measurable outcomes to track success.

4. **Create a "culture of community commitment"** throughout the organization, with the hospital's leaders setting the tone for the medical staff and hospital employees.

5. **Conduct routine assessments** of the community's health status, using the first assessment as a baseline by which to track progress and the success of community health initiatives.

6. **Develop community health status indicators** and routinely report them widely to all key stakeholders, highlighting both areas of success as well as areas in need of improvement.

7. **Consider creating a board committee** to oversee the community health partnership and ensure the partnership is "staying on track" and making progress toward achieving its goals.

Rules for Building Sustainable Community Partnerships	
Rule 1	It's not an event or a one-time fix, but a continuous commitment to community
Rule 2	Lasting partnerships cannot be created overnight, and must be sustained over time
Rule 3	Don't reinvent the wheel; learn from and use the success of others
Rule 4	Cultivate broad-based buy-in and commitment from all stakeholders
Rule 5	Communicate, communicate, and then communicate some more

8. **Hold the CEO accountable** for achieving community health improvement objectives by developing specific, measurable outcomes that are mutually agreed upon with the CEO.

9. **Continuously integrate existing initiatives** for community health assessment with new ones.

10. **Build and sustain the concept of board responsibility** for community assessment, involvement and improvement, including an emphasis on community health at board meetings and in the board's regular board self-assessment process.

Using Community Connections to Build Community Health and Strengthen Public Trust

Hospitals and health systems impact their community in many dimensions, giving hospital leaders and trustees a unique opportunity to connect with and influence a variety of stakeholders. Potential stakeholders hospitals should consider

Testing Community Centeredness

The following statements include key components of a community-centered hospital or health system. How would you respond to the following statements?

- We have clearly defined our community.
- Our mission describes our commitment to the community, and is used to evaluate key decisions facing the hospital.
- We promote and support specific initiatives whose sole purpose is improving community health.
- We assess various stakeholders' needs and interests when developing goals and strategies.
- We regularly discuss community health improvement challenges and barriers.
- We meet regularly with community partners to assess and discuss our progress in meeting community needs.
- We have formal working relationships with organizations that share our community health improvement mission and vision, and that leverage our services and resources for maximum benefit.
- We regularly assess the value and impact of our joint community health improvement efforts.
- We communicate our efforts and results widely in our community in the form of a community benefit report.
- CEO performance objectives include a focus on improving community health.

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Community Centeredness: Questions to Consider

- What is the state of public trust in your hospital?
- Do people in your community see your hospital as being community-centered?
- Can you describe your community partnerships and their value and results?
- What does community accountability mean to you? How do you define and measure it?
- What are you doing to ensure that the entire organization embraces community accountability?
- What strategies do you use to engage the community in the hospital's long-range planning?
- What information about hospital performance do you report to your community?
- What approaches do you use to advocate in your community and to legislators?
- What is the individual community and political advocacy role of every trustee?

partnering with include patients and families; advocacy groups; churches; schools; health policy makers; physicians; hospital employees; the media; insurers; lenders; and the general public.

Ensuring Collaborative Community Governance

Collaborating in meaningful ways with key community influencers and stakeholders is no easy task. Every partnership will be different, as each organization has its own structure, strategies to addressing local challenges, and individual agendas and goals. In addition, partnerships often lack a formal structure and may not have a formal authority for making final decisions.

Hospital leaders can be the catalyst for developing successful community-based partnerships by ensuring a focus on shared goals and objectives, and creating a mutually agreed upon process for the group's meetings and decision-making approaches. When establishing community-based partnerships, boards should consider the following principles:

- Engage a wide spectrum of the community as partners for improving community health;

- Identify and invest in existing community assets rather than creating new assets;

- Be willing to let go of control;

- Be transparent, open and inclusive; and

- Be accountable through ongoing measurement, reporting and action plans for improvement.

Identifying, Evaluating and Including Partners. Although partnership potential varies greatly from community-to-community, the guidelines for determining the most appropriate stakeholders remains the same. When developing partnerships, hospital leaders should consider whether the prospective partner:

- Can commit to the partnership's vision and goals;

- Brings something unique and valuable to the table;

- Is willing to commit meaningful resources;

- Fits existing "zones of collaboration" or creates new ones; and

- Is truly interested in advancing community health.

The Result of Collaborative Community Governance. Successful community partnerships are formed with a shared vision, coordinated, sustainable solutions to improve community health. The shared efforts and resources translate to a better use of limited resources, thus ensuring that the right care, service, test or treatment is provided in the right place and the right time. Effective partnerships also result in improved understanding and trust between the hospital and the community as a whole, and an expanded pool of powerful advocates for local and regional health needs. In addition, collaboration to improve the community's health sends a powerful message to the community about the hospital's commitment to providing community benefit and improving the overall health of local citizens, resulting in increased local support for the hospital.

Avenues for Building Community Centeredness

In addition to building and sustaining partnerships, there are a variety of avenues by which hospital trustees and leaders can gain a greater understanding of the community's health care needs and challenges, increase awareness of existing programs, seek feedback and ideas for new initiatives, and build trust and promote the hospital's image. These include:

- Community surveys;

- Focus groups with key stakeholders;

- Task forces with hospital leaders, employees and key stakeholders;

- Conducting a community needs assessment;

- Advertising and promotion of the hospital's services and community benefit initiatives;

- Presentations throughout the community;

- Interviews with patients, key stakeholders, and the community at-large; and

- Healthy community initiatives.

The "bottom line" value of being a community-centered organization is that the community will better understand the challenges the hospital is facing, the hospital's efforts to address the challenges, and the barriers to success. The hospital must connect with stakeholders and key constituents in ways that can be leveraged to more successfully advance the hospital's agenda. The benefits that result from the hospital's community benefit initiatives must be defined, reported and discussed throughout the community to build a sense of the hospital's health care and economic value.

Pricing, quality and governance transparency are becoming increasingly important to the business community, governments, payers and consumers. Hospitals should provide information on pricing, quality, compensation and governance practices to enrich the community's awareness, confidence and trust. This will not only build greater community support for the hospital's efforts, but will also help patients and the community as a whole trust that the hospital, its staff and physicians are committed to the hospital's mission and vision of community care, not to simply create economic gain.

Making Community Centeredness Happen at Your Organization

Hospital boards can take steps now to become a community-centered board. Key action steps include:

- Ensuring that the board has a clear, consensus-driven understanding of community health issues and needs;

- Conducting an annual or semi-annual community health needs assessment;

- Establishing a process for eliciting community input and viewpoints;

- Ensuring that board policies support community engagement and involvement programs;

- Monitoring and evaluating the hospital's progress in meeting its community service goals;

- Ensuring that board composition represents a broad spectrum of community perspectives;

- Staying continuously aware of the extent of the community's health care needs; and

- Engaging in community-centered thinking and actions at every board meeting.

AHA Study: Re-Establishing Community Bonds
A study by the American Hospital Association and American College of Healthcare Executives identified seven key strategies that leading hospitals use to maintain their focus on community health. Strategies include:
1. **Envision a healthy community:** set goals that incorporate community health as part of your strategic initiatives.
2. **Finance a healthy community:** Compensate management based on achieving pre-established community health criteria.
3. **Educate about a healthy community:** Establish a curriculum to teach community health initiatives to your hospital's staff, physicians and board members.
4. **Personnel decisions for a healthy community:** Establish a senior management position for community health.
5. **Market for community health:** Promote community health with and through partners.
6. **Structures to support community health:** Create a committee of the board to promote quality and community health.
7. **Processes that enhance community health:** Develop an ongoing board improvement process.

Source: Dolan, Thomas. Rekindling the Flame. Hospitals & Health Networks. October 2001.

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Larry has been a long-time governance leader, both as a consultant and a trustee. He served for six years as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of 107-bed Mt. Hood Medical Center, Gresham, Oregon. He has also been a trustee of Portland, Oregon's Legacy Health System and two of its predecessor organizations, Healthlink and Metropolitan Hospitals, with a combined 12 years of governing service to these three systems.

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The business of health care is changing—rapidly, dramatically, daily. Hospitals and health systems need fast, flexible, forward-looking solutions to the challenges that determine their future. The Walker Company offers a range of services that can improve governance effectiveness, sharpen organizational intelligence, and enhance strategic competitiveness to help you keep pace with today's turbulent change.

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GovernanceWORKS™

GovernanceWORKS™ is a comprehensive governance development solution for hospital and health system boards of trustees. Through GovernanceWORKS™, The Walker Company serves as your dedicated governance development resource. We provide continuity, independent and informed outside viewpoints, and practical, organized and coordinated approaches to improving governance and leadership.

- Governance Diagnostix™, a top-to-bottom examination and analysis of governance structure, functions and effectiveness
- AssessmentWORKS™, a comprehensive board self-assessment
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- SuccessionWORKS™, a total trustee recruitment solution
- PerformanceWORKS, a solution for conducting an accountable CEO compensation and performance evaluation process

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- Pre-planning and preparation, including objectives and logistics
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- Meeting facilitation and management
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