



PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center: Reimagining Community Health



Karen Santangelo, CFRE
Chief Philanthropy Officer

In planning its new Emergency Department, [PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center](#) took a deep look at the needs of the community and how to really address those needs and serve their patients, from an aging population to complex patients with both medical and non-medical needs to caregiver fatigue among healthcare givers. The resulting plan is a tremendous innovation in emergency healthcare delivery that extends to include a broader focus on overall community health, offering solutions for the whole patient. We spoke with Chief Philanthropy Officer Karen Santangelo about what this means for the future of the PeaceHealth Southwest community and how it could change the healthcare industry.

Consider your experience the last time you were in an emergency room. Emergency patients experience a range of challenging situations daily, and an ER visit can be a very stressful situation. In an emergency, some patients and their loved ones may face confusion locating the appropriate entrance and parking, adding to their anxiety. Due to the unpredictable nature of emergencies, waiting times in the emergency room can be prolonged, causing patients to worry about the severity of their condition and length of their stay. Emergency rooms are often bustling with activity as medical professionals attend to patients, noisy equipment makes unfamiliar sounds, and many conversations occur simultaneously. This can be overwhelming for patients, making it difficult to relax.

In emergency care, the focus is primarily on stabilizing acute conditions and addressing immediate medical concerns. There may not always be sufficient time or resources to thoroughly address underlying or chronic issues, leaving patients with a sense of being temporarily patched up. [PeaceHealth Southwest](#) is out to change all this and bring healing and humanity back to emergency care.

The PeaceHealth Southwest hospital sees more than 80,000 patients in its Emergency Department annually, and 40% of those patients are complex, meaning they have both medical and non-medical needs. These needs range from experiencing domestic abuse, coming in with substance use disorders, being houseless, suffering from

Rendering by ZGF Architects of the new PeaceHealth Emergency Department



PeaceHealth



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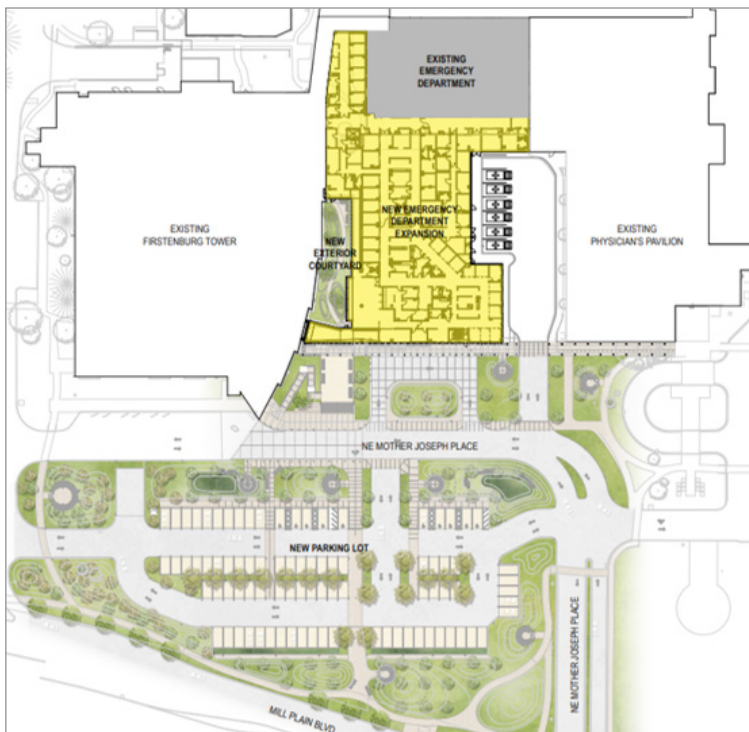
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food insecurity or isolation, experiencing mental health issues, or a host of other non-medical problems that affect overall health. Many of these patients are high utilizers, visiting the emergency room five or more times a year. Most hospitals try to connect people with community resources to offer some help to those in need, but that often involves not much more than handing them a pamphlet or slip of paper with a phone number. Emergency care staff don't have the ability or resources to follow up, and patient follow-through is often inconsistent and not always possible due to life circumstances. When communities rely on emergency departments to fill the social services gap, the result is high costs (mostly paid by the minority fraction of patients with commercial health insurance), overstretched medical staff, and poor long-term outcomes. Those with substance use disorders leave without connecting to treatment options, victims of domestic violence haven't been provided with the support needed to escape an unsafe environment, and houseless patients don't receive housing resources.

PeaceHealth examined these issues when designing its new Emergency Department expansion, wanting to explore solutions for addressing the unmet needs of patients, caregivers, and the community. Thought went

The layout of the new Emergency Department (the gray shaded area indicates the old Emergency Department)



In 2011, PeaceHealth Southwest joined the ten-hospital PeaceHealth medical system that stretches from Ketchikan, Alaska to Cottage Grove, Oregon, founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Peace. The hospital itself was founded in 1858 by Mother Joseph of Providence.

Serving Southwest Washington out of Vancouver, PeaceHealth is a not-for-profit organization. Karen Santangelo, Chief Philanthropy Officer, explains what she loves about the organization: "People really live the mission," she says. And the organization hovers in the sweet spot where flexibility meets institutional clout. "The hospital is big enough to *have* an impact, but small enough to *make* an impact."

into the design of everything from lighting choices to room structure to way-finding in order to build a center focused on treating the whole person. The new Emergency Department includes more treatment rooms, a new observation unit, respite areas for caregivers, outdoor pocket gardens, and expanded parking, as well as its most novel innovation: a [Community Health Hub \(CHH\)](#).

The Community Health Hub (CHH)

The [CHH](#) is a unique initiative; there is no other model like it in the U.S., and it could revolutionize emergency care, serving as a pilot for future similar programs in other regions. The upstairs of the PeaceHealth Southwest Emergency Department will be a place where caregivers can connect patients directly with community non-profit partners who provide important services to bridge the gap between urgent medical needs and long-term health needs. Patients will have access to addiction treatment resources, domestic violence advocacy, mental health assistance, food resources, compassionate housing assistance, and more (see the graphic on the following page, which showcases CHH community partners). The connection between the patient and these resources will be made in real time, with a direct, warm hand-off from a healthcare provider.

The CHH is badge-access only, providing a secure space with confidential, private rooms where patients can meet with community providers. A windowed play area for children ensures parents can keep an eye on their children while being able to speak privately and candidly. Having this physical space and immediate access to community social service partners will help patients get the support they need when they need it. Listen to Dr. Dina Brothers, Emergency Department Physician, talk about what the CHH will mean for her patients [here](#).

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Community Health Hub non-profit partners



The Community Health Hub marks a revolution in emergency healthcare, providing integrated social services to address the root causes undermining health, rather than just meeting urgent medical needs. Over time, the hope is that this approach creates a healthier community while reducing long-term costs. “Emergency care is the most expensive care,” explains Santangelo. “By helping patients stay healthy and addressing the social determinants of health, we can reduce emergency visits and lower overall costs.” It’s a win all around — for patients, for the hospital, and for the community.

But, she notes, there will be up-front costs, and the CHH is entirely donor-funded. “This is where philanthropy comes in,” she says. “Healthcare works on tight margins and can’t take expensive risks, but philanthropy makes something like this possible.” To date, they have raised \$51 million of their \$60 million funding goal. They are hoping to close the gap as donors

begin to see the incredible benefits of this integrated structure and compassionate approach.

“It’s easy to forget the humanity of what you’re doing when we’re all in our hyper-specialized lanes and focused on one small aspect of a larger picture,” Karen remarks. “This project brings healthcare back to seeing the whole patient. PeaceHealth is doing something really different with this, and I think donors are as inspired by it as I am.”

A leap of faith

The CHH will not be without its challenges. It will require a significant cultural change to move to this new model of care. Emergency departments are organized for maximum efficiency; the volume of patients demands that staff find ways to move them through the process as quickly as possible, managing for a balance between speed and care. This means most emergency room staff are often wired to seek peak efficiency, and reorienting around an integrative model that may require a slower process could be challenging.

“It requires a good deal of trust,” says Santangelo. “People need to believe in the long-term benefit at first, until they can see it manifest over time.” Fortunately, there are some ways to help navigate this process. Brooke Malloy, LSWAIC, will serve as the program manager of the CHH, and she has already been working in the Emergency Department in her capacity as a social worker, so she understands the culture and knows the staff. Karen has been arranging opportunities for the staff to speak with donors to hear different perspectives on what this shift could mean for the community, fostering a more open mindset as they consider how the project will affect their work.

Rendering by ZGF Architects of the PeaceHealth new registration desk



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Rendering by ZGF Architects of a consultation room



The Community Health Hub opens in July 2024 as the first phase of construction is completed, though some community partners have already been operating on-site for many years. [Sea Mar](#) provides a variety of behavioral health and community service offerings, and [Lifeline Connections](#) helps patients experiencing substance use or mental health conditions.

Emergency Department upgrades

The Community Health Hub may be the most innovative aspect of the new Emergency Department, but it's not the only upgrade! The Emergency Department as a whole will double in size. Ground-floor treatment rooms will increase from 52 to 76, and rooms will be larger with much of the necessary equipment already there. Importantly, they will be organized into "neighborhoods"; this will allow the hospital to isolate different groups or even shut sections down during less busy periods to manage staffing needs.

Karen tells the story of working with community partners to better understand the needs of patients as the hospital designed the new Emergency Department. For example, the YWCA helped PeaceHealth create a better design for victims of domestic violence. Previously, people who came in with their partners were treated and then frequently sent back out through the waiting room where their partner sat waiting. Now, these individuals can be escorted up to the Community Health Hub to learn about resources, and a private exit means they can leave without encountering their partner.

New amenities will make the emergency experience easier and less traumatic. Easier parking and a covered walkway make arrival easier and more comfortable. The new registration area will facilitate a smoother, quicker triage process. Elderly patients will find things more accommodative with upgrades such as larger clocks, hearing aids available, and simplified way-finding.

One of the most significant upgrades is a 24-bed observation unit that will be added upstairs. This will allow patients who are waiting for test results to have a quiet space to wait comfortably with family away from the busy atmosphere of the waiting room.

The anxiety of an emergency visit experience can be amplified for those who are experiencing a mental health crisis. The new Emergency Department includes "safer rooms" for people experiencing behavioral health issues, which will make the space safer for those who might be at risk of harm to themselves or others.

Caregivers were not left out of the design; the hospital recognized the need to provide an environment that nourishes those giving care as well as patients. The design includes new respite spaces, quiet rooms to meet with family away from the emergency room tumult, outdoor spaces, and calmer lighting.

Rendering by ZGF Architects of the courtyard



Looking ahead for PeaceHealth Southwest

PeaceHealth Southwest is working to get ahead of the changes facing the Southwest Washington community. The population is growing — by an anticipated 6.4% by 2026 — and aging; Southwest Washington is expecting growth by nearly 24% of it 65 to 84-year-olds, compared to a national average of only 5.4%. There are more people in crisis than ever, with opioid and overdose deaths increasing in record amounts while housing and food insecurity continue to plague Clark County.

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It is possible to rise to the challenge, but it requires a reimagining of how healthcare services are delivered. PeaceHealth Southwest has taken up the charge and is leading the way.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this enterprise is the potential for it to serve as a model for other communities and healthcare organizations. Everything that PeaceHealth Southwest learns and discovers throughout this process can give other facilities a head start in building their own programs to address the expanding needs of communities and integrate social justice and whole-person care into their healthcare approach.

This extraordinary initiative calls for extraordinary support from partners in the community. “One of the most meaningful aspects of my role is that I am able to work with people who really want to make a difference,” says Santangelo. “I think of our work as being sort of match-makers — matching philanthropists with the projects and outcomes that are most important to them and their legacies. It’s humbling when you see the tremendous good that can be accomplished.”

Learn more

To learn more about how you can make a difference for the future of Southwest Washington, you can reach Karen at the contact information below, or visit <https://www.peacehealth.org/hospitals/southwest-medical-center> to learn more about the hospital. You can also watch a short, impactful video presentation about the new Emergency Department [here](#).

Karen Santangelo, CFRE,
Chief Philanthropy Officer
KSantangelo@PeaceHealth.org
360.514.3670

“As individuals, families, and a community, we hold a collective responsibility to address the healthcare shortfalls that exist all around us. By helping others when and where we can, we not only improve the lives of our neighbors who are suffering, but we strengthen our entire community.”

~ Michael Lynch, Leadership Supporter of PeaceHealth Southwest’s Emergency Department and Community Health Hub

