

On a Mission to Connect Leaders to Protect and Enhance Their Community's Healthcare

As a former community hospital board member for 35 years and a former community leader, including my role as Mayor of a small Texas city, and as a hospital risk management professional, I find the hospital failure rates in Texas and the country as a whole extremely alarming. So much so I have sought to learn why this trend is continuing in the face of efforts to slow it down.

Even though the financial conditions of failed and struggling hospitals may seem to be the primary cause of their troubles, my larger questions are, "Where are the community leaders in these situations? Do they know this is coming? Can they do something about it?"

To answer these questions, I have engaged a team of research experts to dig into what may be one of the most compelling solutions to consider: Organize and connect community leaders and hospital stakeholders to understand and build a framework to assure their hospital will not only survive but thrive.

Why do I care about this? One of the major assets of any community is their hospital – if you are blessed to have one. Too many communities once had a hospital and now they don't. In Texas, 27 hospitals closed from 2010-2020. In other states, there were 120 closures during this time. This is alarming! Where were the community leaders?

If your hospital closes or you must sell it or merge with a larger health care system to remain open, what's the impact?

My hope is that you can avoid this and not have to go through what we did in Temple, Texas when we "gave" the King's Daughter's Hospital, a 105-year-old, 120-bed community hospital to what was then Scott & White Hospital.

Once you lose it, you never get it back. This is my story and why I care.

So, what are the drivers to closure or selling and what strategies can you consider to reduce the risk?

In our research and countless roundtable discussion in our search for solutions, we developed the belief that it was not a matter of the community leaders ignoring or not caring. It was more about not being aware and not having a way to organize the effort of all stakeholders in the community to stay ahead of the issues that contribute to hospitals sliding toward failure. The need for a framework and a roadmap for connecting hospitals and community leaders morphed into the program we've created called Health Connect.

To test our findings and the concept of creating strong connections, we created a task force to develop the Health Connect Process & Plan. We secured grant funding from Texas Mutual Insurance Company and in-kind assistance from HealthSure and TORCH. We then determined we needed hospital demonstration sites to test Health Connect's feasibility and prove it would be beneficial to participating communities.

Three Texas communities agreed to participate: Cuero, Electra, and Llano.

So, what have we learned so far?

Community leaders are relied upon to empower and sustain the health, safety, and wellbeing of their fellow citizens.

HEALTHCONNECT

On a Mission to Connect Leaders to Protect and Enhance Their Community's Healthcare

And community wellbeing requires top-quality and readily accessible medical care.

As community leaders, we are stewards of the community assets. The soul of a community resides in the foundational mission of its institutions to protect, preserve, and enrich. Most institutions are evident by their brick and mortar. Others are evident by sound, shared beliefs such as marriage, family, religion, government, and the economy. If something adverse happens to one institution, all others are affected and the community's ability to function is harmed.

When we are blessed to inherit a health care system in our community, we are duly charged with protecting its continuity. Our priority must be to protect this community treasure from failing. And, when we hand off our institution to the next generation of leaders, we must deliver it in better condition than when we found it. As leaders we must act intentionally to make our healthcare system excellent and fully functional to properly serve the community that owns this crucial asset.

There are four key questions leaders must answer to connect and work toward becoming a Health Connect community.

1. What does a healthy community look like?
2. What's missing in the community to assure its health?
3. Who are the leaders most responsible for assuring a healthy community?
4. What do these leaders need to know to contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community?

The answers to these questions will shape your strategy for ensuring your hospital remains not only viable but thrives. This is a noble mission to undertake. Don't miss the opportunity to put your mark on the history of your community. Protect your most precious health resource. Protect your hospital.

Through the Health Connect initiative, we are committed to finding a way forward for community and hospital leaders to not only perpetuate but to enhance and thrive with and for the community it serves. We think we have discovered how, and we ask you to join us and discover for yourself.

--- Barry Couch

barryc@healthsure.com
512.366.3739

Why Health Connect?

Founders Barry Couch and John Henderson have been deeply involved in rural healthcare and community health for most of their working lives. The failure of hundreds of rural hospitals across the country has contributed to the deterioration and – in many cases – the virtual disappearance of the communities they once served. The Health Connect research team seeks to prove there is a direct connection between the health of a hospital and the strength of its connection with the community. We are on a mission to ensure hospital leaders have the means to initiate, nurture and sustain the strongest possible connection with their communities.