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SVHC to merge with Dartmouth Health

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SVHC Deerfield Valley Campus

By Tyler Lederer

CEO says no major changes planned

WILMINGTON - Southwestern Vermont Health Care will become a member of Dartmouth Health, bringing its local Deerfield Valley medical clinic under the umbrella of the New Hampshire-based health network.

Described by SVHC CEO Tom Dee as an “integration affiliation agreement” rather than a full merger, the plan would make SVHC a member of the Dartmouth Health network. Other members include Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, NH; Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center in Windsor; Cheshire Medical Center in Keene, NH; and satellite clinics throughout southern Vermont and New Hampshire.

“We feel very positive,” said Dee about the agreement. “This is something that we’ve been really working toward for the better part of 10 years since we first became affiliated with Dartmouth.” He added, “We know them well and they know us well so we think it’s a very good relationship.”

Collaboration between the two entities goes back to 2010 “when the organization was looking for an academic partner,” said Dr. Trey Dobson, chief medical officer for SVHC. Currently, the two share a pool of physicians, working under the banner of Dartmouth Hitchcock Putnam Physicians. Several clinics, including the SVMC Deerfield Valley Campus in Wilmington, are already branded as Dartmouth Hitchcock clinics on Dartmouth Health’s website.

Dobson said the agreement would allow much closer collaboration than would be possible as two separate organizations, noting there were regulatory reasons they could not. “By becoming a full member,” he said, “we’re allowed to share resources back and forth to benefit the system.”

Dartmouth Health’s resources are a boon to the smaller SVHC in a time when the nature of health care is changing, according to Dee. “We’ve seen things are much more challenging from a recruitment standpoint, from developing new services, there’s additional financial challenges,” he said. “We think that working with an academic medical center will allow us to move ahead and create services that we would not be able to do on our own.”

Recruitment is particularly important for the SVMC Deerfield Valley Campus, which has had an open full-time physician position since the departure of Dr. Peter Park in June. Park had worked at the clinic for almost three decades. Currently, there are only two full-time providers at the clinic: Dr. Dagmar Tobits, who has been working there since 2013, and family nurse practitioner Lisa Moulton, who previously worked at Dover’s Mountain Medical Clinic; she began work at the Wilmington clinic in September.

“Our top priority right now is continuing to recruit,” said Dee. “We’re also looking to add additional positions to support the physicians there.”

Dee said SVHC was looking at the idea of creating a “family medicine training program,” which would be sponsored by Dartmouth Health but operated by SVHC. It would consist of a three-year training program, in which students work in hospitals, have a chance to see the region, develop a relationship, and remain in the system after completing the program. “An organization that has access to teaching programs is a real significant leg-up in terms of being able to recruit doctors,” he said.

Dobson said the merger will not lead to physicians leaving for other Dartmouth Health members. While some physicians already work in multiple places within the larger networks, this is not typical. “Physicians choose one work site and that’s how we work,” he said. “Generally we don’t travel back and forth.”

As for new services, Dee said Dartmouth Health’s national cancer center would allow SVHC access to their expertise for a regional cancer center SVHC is developing. Health care workers at the Deerfield Valley Campus could refer patients to the regional center. “Working closely with Dartmouth allows us to tap into their specialists, their clinical drug trials,” and to “bring down different staff members for assistance,” he said.

Dee did not specify any additional services that may be coming to Wilmington, calling it a work in progress. He noted he was sure SVHC will expand their services for diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease. “We will be working with that team of providers and talking about what the needs are,” he said.

Dee said the merger would have no impact on the Deerfield Valley Regional Advisory Group. “All of our regional advisory boards are remaining in place and will continue to advise our board and management,” he said.

Financially, Dee said being a member of Dartmouth creates an “economy of scale” that will be good for their bottom line. “They buy so much more in their network than we do so they can get better pricing,” he said. “We can access that.”

Dee emphasized that money spent at SVHC locations would stay in local communities. SVHC is currently raising money for the regional cancer center and an emergency department expansion at their Bennington hospital. “The money that we raised from a philanthropic standpoint is all money that stays here,” he said.

Dee warned that none of this would take place overnight. The agreement still needs to go through a regulatory process. Integration of medical records into Dartmouth’s system may take years. SVHC hopes to close on the deal in March 2023. “We expect to get approval, we expect we’re going to be received well,” he said.

As for Dee himself? “I’m here. I’m continuing in this role and continuing as CEO,” he said.

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