



Medicine on the Move:

Rolling out health care to rural residents

By Diana LaChance

At 1,069 square miles, Jackson County is the third largest in the state of Alabama. Yet its population is a modest 53,000 residents. For county residents in need of medical care, that leaves a lot of distance to cover. Too much distance, says Kim Bryant, CEO of Highlands Medical Center in Scottsboro, Ala.

"Jackson County has a lot of rural communities, so you've got pockets of people who have limited [access to] health care," says Bryant. As a result, many end up treating Highlands as a one-stop shop, a primary care provider and hospital all rolled into one. "A lot of people who don't have primary care come to our ER. We get patients with illnesses like congenital heart failure that come to the hospital two, three, four times a month," he explains.

That has become an even bigger

problem over the last few months given the government's recent changes to health care. Under the new plan, says Bryant, "the government is going to start reducing payments to hospitals for multiple admissions for the same illnesses." All of which leads to some difficult questions. "How do you address the patients that have these illnesses?" he asks. "And how can we work collectively together to keep those patients well and at home?"

Bryant knew that, to address these challenges, he would have to get creative. Enter Medicine on the Move, a fully stocked mobile medical unit — or bus — that brings free clinical and educational services directly to Jackson County's underserved populations. Bryant says he purchased the "completely outfitted" bus this past September with the blessing of the Highlands Board, even driving it back

from New York himself, though the concept was one he had been mulling over long before then.

"Three years ago when I came into this role, I thought of this idea to get a bus," he says. "The dream was to get out to those communities in our county and our adjacent counties and provide a service to the people." But he also knew the bus would ensure that Highlands could keep up with the changing health care landscape. "With the bus, we have the opportunity to help keep people out of the hospital," he says. "We can identify problems early on so they can get the treatment they need before it's severe."

Since its inaugural outing on March 1, the bus has gone out two to three times a week across the county, providing everything from blood sugar and cholesterol screenings to blood pressure checks. "We see you on the

bus whether you are insured or not. It doesn't matter," says Bryant. "We also refer patients to their doctor if necessary, or if they have no doctor, we refer them to a physician accepting new patients. And we educate the community if there are services out there that they may qualify for, such as a state insurance program or Medicaid."

Bryant says the bus is normally staffed by one clerical person and one medical person, but as of August, oversight has been provided by Dr. Maggie Belue, director of the Highlands Family Medicine Clinic. It's a perfect choice, given Belue's experience with rural health care in Jackson County. "During my residency at the Mayo Clinic, I was involved in a lot of community outreach and education," she says. "So as the director here, I want to take the opportunity to go out in the community where the bus is the only option. It's just an excellent resource to be able to introduce health care and to reach out to communities that are in need."

It's also an excellent way to educate Jackson County residents about local healthcare options. "Hopefully, the bus will be a resource to let Jackson County residents know about the services offered at Highlands Medical Center," says Bryant. "We can provide many of the same services as other hospitals in surrounding counties with the convenience of being close to home."

So far the bus has proved to be a success and the staff at Highlands keeps thinking of new services to offer based on feedback from the community. Bryant says he is pleased by the community's response to the bus. "I'm actually looking for a second bus!" he says. "I want this mobile program to grow."

In the meantime, the bus is helping those in need, and even those who may not know they are in need. "For some of the people the bus visits, it might not occur to them that anything is wrong," says Bryant. "But they see the bus and think, 'Why not check and see?' These are people who may not even want to go to the doctor, but who are now more likely to have a checkup if the bus is right there."

That type of preventive health care is exactly what Bryant set out to



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER— Highlands Medical Center Marketing Manager Jennifer McCurdy shares information about services available with Virginia Smith (left) and Argei Graham.



MOBILE MEDICINE — Dr. Maggie Belue, Director of Highlands Family Medicine Clinic, believes the bus is an excellent outreach tool for rural communities.

achieve three years ago when he first envisioned Medicine on the Move. "We're here to make a difference in the lives of people throughout the rural communities we are serving. We want you healthy and we're pleased that our mobile medical unit is helping us achieve that goal." ■

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Visit highlandsmedcenter.com/medicine_on_the_move.php to learn more about the services offered by the bus.