

Supporting rural communities in their goal to provide health care close to home

The year was 2008. Physicians in Astoria were retiring and new recruitments were very challenging. The economy was hurting. Columbia Memorial Hospital, one of Oregon's 32 critical access rural hospitals, had been forced to close its chemotherapy program. Cancer patients living on the North Coast were traveling hours for care, sometimes on a daily or weekly basis. The impact of fatigue on these individuals was profound, along with the stress of the added financial burden. Access to other specialties, like cardiology, was also constrained. Physician, hospital and community leaders in Astoria knew something had to change.

"We were struggling to recruit physicians," said Erik Thorsen, Columbia Memorial Hospital chief executive officer. "We needed to find a new way to attract specialty physicians to the North Coast. We needed a partner."

They turned to OHSU. The request was to address the immediate need of helping cancer patients. Would it be possible to collaborate to recruit a medical oncologist to serve Astoria? Perhaps someone who could be employed by OHSU but would spend part of each week seeing patients in Astoria and surrounding communities?

Mark O'Hollaren, vice president of strategic outreach at OHSU, answered that initial call from Thorsen. Now, more than a decade later, those discussions have blossomed into an innovative health care collaboration that provides thousands of North Coast patients access to cancer, cardiology and surgery specialty services, as well as emergency medicine and telehealth.

"Where you live in Oregon should not dictate the care you receive. It's clear that every community is different, and successful collaboration depends on OHSU following the local lead in developing solutions," said O'Hollaren. "The collaboration in Astoria was designed from the beginning to support and leverage existing health care resources, not supplant them."

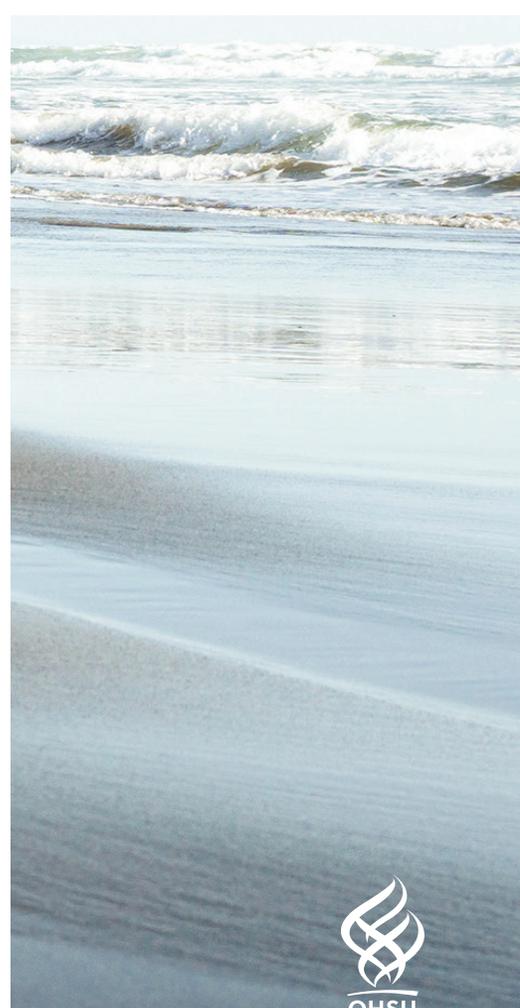
The first step was to recruit the needed medical oncologist who agreed to split his practice between OHSU and Columbia Memorial Hospital (CMH). As word spread, more OHSU faculty oncologists joined the academic-rural collaboration. Later, additional clinic space was obtained. Equipment was donated. The relationship was named – the CMH/OHSU Cancer Care Center. Local artists donated paintings, sculpture and pottery to the center.

As the relationship deepened, the North Coast community, led by then-Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen and others, came together around a vision for a new \$16 million,

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19,600-square-foot cancer care facility. Funds for the building were raised from a myriad of sources: city bonds, grants, philanthropy, auctions.

In 2017, the state-of-the-art building opened and the initiative was newly formalized as the CMH-OHSU Knight Cancer Collaborative. Today, the collaborative provides a full suite of advanced cancer services, including radiation therapy, and employs physicians, health care providers and staff who care for thousands of patients each year.

“No cancer patient in the Astoria region has to drive long distances for personalized care anymore,” said O’Hollaren. “This is an enormously rewarding outcome.”

But the partners didn’t stop there. As the cancer initiative was growing, OHSU and CMH applied the successful model – OHSU recruits (and employs) physicians who live and practice, either full or part time, in Astoria and surrounding communities – to expand access to cardiology, emergency medicine and general surgery.

“We found a great partner in OHSU,” said Thorsen. “There’s really no way a rural hospital like ours could recruit these very high-quality specialty physicians to our community without the benefit of OHSU’s reputation.”

More recently, this model has been expanded to OHSU’s missions of education and research. For example, learners enrolled in OHSU schools are embedded at Astoria clinics and the hospital, helping them understand the health care needs of rural settings. Already, CMH has recruited two emergency medicine specialists from these educational rotations.

Further, the OHSU Moore Institute for Nutrition & Wellness has established Astoria as one of five statewide “hubs” in its initiative to develop research and education projects addressing the link between poor nutrition during pregnancy with adult chronic disease rates. This work is being conducted in collaboration with local health care providers, school districts and social service organizations.

OHSU is active in other rural settings across Oregon. As with Astoria, the model of collaboration is tailored to community need. In Klamath Falls, for example, the focus is equal parts providing access to primary care services and contributing to health care workforce stability. Two flagship education programs are located in Klamath Falls – OHSU-Cascades East Family Medicine Residency and the OHSU Campus for Rural Health – and operate in close collaboration with Sky Lakes Medical Center. Many of the learners participating in these OHSU programs have made decisions to remain in eastern Oregon to practice.

OHSU’s collaborative efforts with rural communities not only improve health care access, they contribute to regional economic vitality. In addition to the jobs associated with the construction of new clinic facilities, the ancillary effect of permanent job creation from new specialty services and physician recruitments can be dramatic: In 2010, Columbia Memorial Hospital employed 375 people. Today, that number is 715.

“This collaboration has led to significant economic activity by nearly doubling our employee base and tripling our net annual revenue,” Thorsen said. “Most importantly, our patient satisfaction scores have climbed dramatically and people in our community no longer have to spend time and money traveling long distances to obtain health care.”

“One of OHSU’s goals is to ensure Oregonians can access a wide expanse of care close to home,” said O’Hollaren. “Our faculty enjoy working in these rural settings, our students enjoy going there to train and the local economy is buttressed. It’s a win-win all around.”