

Valencia County STILL Needs an Emergency Hospital – A New View on a Tired Subject

Article One of Three

Ten years ago Valencia County homeowners approved a mill levy to operate “A Hospital/24-hour Emergency Healthcare Facility.” Today there is still no hospital. The Medical Care Advocates of Valencia (MCA-VC) agrees Valencia County not only deserves to see progress on their hospital, they need to see the **most appropriate facility** in a **central location** to serve all of its residents.

The Specialty Micro-Hospital Verses the Traditional Rural Hospital

The original contract proposal by Ameris in 2013 was for a rural hospital. The American Hospital Association published a factsheet in 2016 on rural hospitals listing the financial challenges they face. Many of these challenges started in the 1980s when the **Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)** developed rules to improve healthcare quality and prevent fraud. These CMS rules resulted in the closing of about 800 poorly performing rural hospitals in the 1980s and 1990s. The current trend in both rural and urban areas is the small, specialty micro-hospital which avoids most of these financial disadvantages.

The definition of "Micro-Hospital" is a smaller hospital designed to a particular purpose or specialization. For Valencia County, it could be designed around the Emergency and Urgent Care Departments with a small Nursing Unit with 4-8 inpatient rooms.

The purpose of this small Nursing Unit is to reduce overcrowding in the ED and to provide:

1. more appropriate care for those patients who no longer need emergency and urgent care while they await discharge or transfer to a hospital in Albuquerque.
2. a place for Observation patients (up to 23 hours) while they wait for additional lab tests or to monitor for effects of medication.
3. short term care (less than 96 hours) for patients who need nursing care or other treatments, or while arrangements are being made for home care. CMS has a rule for rural hospitals that patients must be discharged or transferred with 96 hours.

The purpose of the 24-hour Urgent Care Department is to treat certain illnesses before they become an emergency (e.g. asthma or pneumonia) and to treat less serious illness or injury to reduce overcrowding in the emergency department. In addition, treatment in Urgent Care tends to be less expensive.

The current trend in micro-hospitals has grown because they are less expensive to build and operate. They are specialized to meet the particular needs of the community. It is important that one of the major hospital systems in Albuquerque operate this micro-hospital to ensure highest quality healthcare and lowest operating expense.

Location

The mill levy requires **a single** hospital for the county, so in addition to the appropriate facility, it is important to place it carefully. Realizing that the entire county contributed to the hospital mill levy, and treatment for life-threatening emergencies requires immediate treatment, the hospital should be located in a central location.

MCA-VC proposes a location near Morris Rd and NM-314 for the new hospital as a central location. This would provide emergency care options other than Albuquerque or Socorro for many residents.

The East-West corridor project (Morris Rd/I-25 interchange through NM-314 with a new bridge to NM-47) will further centralize the hospital and may also provide incentive to complete the corridor project sooner.

Summary

There are many benefits to having an Emergency Micro-Hospital with 24-Hour Urgent Care in Valencia County. There are about 21,000 ER visits per year from Valencia County per NM Department of Health (NM DOH) statistics that currently go to Bernalillo County Emergency Rooms. Adding these visits to the 230,000 visits per year from Bernalillo county adds to overcrowding and delays in treatment which increase mortality and poor outcomes.

Estimating from available statistics (NM DOH), it appears that approximately 63% could be treated in Urgent Care and not have to go into Albuquerque. About 34% need the emergency care. For the remaining 2-3%, access to immediate life-saving emergency care prior to transport to Albuquerque not only saves lives but improves the long-term outcomes from heart attack, stroke, major trauma and other major illness/injury.

Valencia county would benefit from having a specialized emergency micro-hospital operated by one of the major hospital systems in Albuquerque.