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Alliance With Hartford Hospital Will Preserve Crucial Academic And Clinical Resource

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The hallmark of prominent and successful academic medical centers is the close integration of education, research and clinical care. This is best accomplished with clinical facilities within or close to the medical center. John Dempsey Hospital at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington is too small and is obsolete for supporting excellence in medical education and research.

Two years ago, the health center proposed a larger 352-bed hospital to replace John Dempsey. This was opposed by hospitals in the area and resulted in the General Assembly commissioning a study by the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering. The study led to legislation requiring the health center to seek partners to support its medical education and research missions and to seek a clinical care hospital partner to own and/or operate and manage replacement clinical facilities on the health center's campus.

Why is this so important? The health center is a major regional economic engine and is at the core of the Greater Hartford health care system. It provides high-quality jobs and strives to achieve advancements in health care through clinical and biomedical research with a significant effect on the state's economy and, most important, on health services provided to residents at its hospital or other hospitals that benefit from the university's medical and dental schools.

The process mandated by the legislature resulted in opportunities for the health center and its hospital partners. First, the health center, with participation by regional hospitals, developed a vision and guiding principles. These principles offered hospitals an opportunity to identify their interest in serving as partners with the health center.

The resulting plan creates the Connecticut Health Education and Research Collaborative that is expected to include the health care center, Bristol Hospital, Connecticut Children's Medical Center, Hartford Hospital, St. Francis Hospital and the Hospital of Central Connecticut. The collaborative will work to support the university's medical education programs, as well as to expand biomedical and health research.

The proposal also resulted in Hartford Healthcare Corp., parent of Hartford Hospital, being selected to operate and manage the health center's clinical facilities in Farmington. A two-campus University Hospital would emerge, with Hartford Healthcare Corp.

operating and managing both hospitals. The state, through the university, would be represented on the University Hospital board.

Financial, governance and labor issues have been considered. The University Hospital would take over operation and management of John Dempsey Hospital, and then a replacement hospital at the health center of about 250 beds, once constructed. Importantly, the proposal uses existing licensed beds of Hartford Hospital and Dempsey without adding new beds to the region. The Hartford Healthcare Corp. would be fiscally responsible for the University Hospital on the health center's campus, limiting the state's ongoing financial support.

There are successful partnerships between public medical schools and private hospitals, such as the University of Massachusetts Medical School and UMass Memorial Medical Center. The 12-year-old partnership between the University of Minnesota, Fairview Health Services and the University of Minnesota Physicians is more relevant, as it helped overcome a similar problem of having a small, insufficient teaching hospital.

The collaborative with the proposed two-campus University Hospital would allow for the creation of a top-tier academic medical center with vibrant teaching, research and clinical care missions, while providing an enhanced community base for primary care and for conducting "real world" medical research.

Failure to act would jeopardize the status and the research capacity of UConn's medical and dental schools. Furthermore, it would mean the continued operation of an inefficient, obsolete Dempsey Hospital with its ongoing operating deficits, which ensures its eventual closure with loss of on-site capacity for teaching and clinical research. The status quo is unacceptable. The cost of any eventual action by the state to sustain quality medical education and research and to achieve high-quality medical care will steadily increase.

The efforts of the health center and its hospital partners over the past eight months achieved a level of collaboration that, if fully implemented, far exceeds what anyone envisioned only one year ago. All parties to this proposal can benefit by creating a regional health care system that will serve as an economic engine and a health care destination. More work is needed, but the foundation for success is in place.

Now is the time for action.

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