

Rural Vermont hospital has long been a vital resource for community health



“Community Connections” spotlights the many ways in which hospitals serve their communities. Richard Slusky, CEO of Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center in Windsor, VT, knows what it takes to build healthier communities, and what he’s learned can help others. His small rural hospital is both a health care and economic anchor in a town of fewer than 4,000 residents. Mt. Ascutney was a 2002 finalist for the prestigious Foster G. McGaw Prize for excellence in community service. The AHA, the Baxter International Foundation and the Cardinal Health Foundation sponsor the award. We spoke to Slusky about his organization’s strong community connections.

AHA News: Many hospitals struggle to maintain the esteem and trust of the people they serve. How will strengthening public trust and creating channels for community outreach be key to the future of the nation’s hospitals?

Slusky: Hospitals need to view themselves as part of their community. They need to be involved economically and politically, and the community needs to recognize the hospital’s interest and involvement. This is particularly true for small rural hospitals, which in many communities are the largest or one of the largest employers in the area. In our town, we’ve had key hospital personnel involved in important community

groups and projects. These include our Rotary Club, the school board and Windsor Improvement Corporation, which is an economic development committee. If the community sees the hospital’s commitment and desire to be involved, the community members will more likely view the hospital as a trusted and vested partner in the future of the community.

AHA News: You collaborate on a wide array of services, like teen drug and alcohol-prevention programs, a free clinic to provide care for the uninsured, nutrition and exercise programs for diabetics, tobacco-prevention programs, school nursing services, community health fairs and the Windsor Connection Resource Center. Are these initiatives a way of helping to ensure the long-term viability of both the hospital and the community?

Slusky: Rural hospitals – like our hospital – need to listen to the community that supports them, and programs like those that you cite help us stay connected to the community. For example, transportation in rural areas can be a problem, and the Windsor Connection Resource Center is a place for social service organizations to meet, coordinate care and arrange to get services to people who need them here in our community. Our hospital has long been recognized as a leader in community health programs and for partnering with other agencies to improve the overall health of the community. We believe it is important to set an example of supporting healthy lifestyles. With healthier individuals, comes a healthier community that will be physically, financially, and economically strong; better



SLUSKY

able to withstand the ups and downs that communities face over periods of time.

AHA News: Does the community recognize the breadth of services you provide and appreciate what your presence means to them?

Slusky: This is a very timely question. We are concluding our 75th year as a community hospital, and during this past year we have repeatedly recognized the good will and contributions from the community as the impetus for our success. Throughout our history, our community has come through for us on numerous occasions. As a very tangible example, our building, built in 1973, would not have been possible without financial support from the community. And that wonderful support continues today. On a financial level, our annual fund continues to meet or exceed its goal each year and we have had two successful capital campaigns. Additionally, members of the community regularly speak out at public forums and venues about their positive experiences with the hospital. Likewise, we aim to be responsive to the needs of the community.

AHA News: How does your governance structure help strengthen your “community connections?”

Slusky: Traditionally, our board has worked to draw representatives to the table from many walks of life. Attention has been focused on people who are particularly connected with the community, who are interested in health care issues within the community and who are able to represent the community at large. We have found this to be a highly successful and effective approach.

For more information on Mt. Ascutney’s community connections, go to www.mtascutneyhospital.org, and click on “Community Health Programs.”