

## CAH status brings better rural care, says AHA award winner

As president and CEO of Marcum & Wallace Memorial Hospital in Irvine, KY, Susan Starling has forged strong partnerships through the years with state and regional health care organizations to improve primary health care services for the 31,000 residents that the 25-bed critical access hospital (CAH) serves in a rural four-county area.



That commitment to building a vibrant health care and economic support system for the eastern Kentucky region has earned Starling the AHA's 2013 Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award, the AHA announced last week. Named for the first director of the AHA's Section for Small or Rural Hospitals, the award recognizes the accomplishments of small or rural hospital leaders who have improved health care in their communities.

Starling worries that the gains made in improving patients' access to care in rural areas could be reversed if Congress decides to restrict small, rural hospitals' eligibility for CAH status – as some federal policymakers have proposed.

"Before the critical access hospital program, we were just trying to keep our doors open," says Starling, who joined Marcum & Wallace Memorial in 1991 as chief operating officer and became its president and CEO 10 years later. She

says the program has allowed the hospital, a member of Cincinnati, OH-based Catholic Health Partners, to "become something we are very proud of in terms of how we have established strong primary care networks and provided our community with the best care they can possibly have within our scope of service."

Congress created the CAH program in 1997, after a wave of hospital closures, to make sure Americans in isolated areas would still have access to health care. For that reason, hospitals designated as CAHs and with no more than 25 beds are reimbursed under Medicare based on their actual costs to provide care, rather than through a prospective payment system.

"Many people don't understand how important the rural hospital is to its community," Starling says. Without rural hospitals, medical and social services and jobs disappear, she asserts. She says they are critical to the economic fabric of their communities.

In announcing this year's Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award winner, the AHA cited Starling's success in connecting uninsured and underinsured patients to a medical home and establishing community lung cancer and breast cancer screening programs,



Starling

among other initiatives. The hospital also is a certified trauma center.

In addition to announcing the award winner, the AHA named three finalists: Michael Franklin, president and CEO of Atlantic General Hospital/Health System in Worcester County, MD; Marcia Dial, CEO of Scotland County Hospital in Memphis, MO; and Lisa Heaton, vice president/administrator and chief nursing officer of Johnson County Community Hospital in Mountain City, TN.

Starling knows grassroots political advocacy is key to getting results at the state and federal level. She shared her concerns about protecting CAHs with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-KY, when he visited her hospital in August. And she counts Rep. Andy Barr, R-KY, her local congressman, as a strong CAH supporter. He also has visited the hospital and "understands rural hospitals' concerns," she says.

She urges rural hospital leaders to invite elected officials to visit their facilities so they can better appreciate what rural hospitals mean to their communities. And she cautions that policies intended to achieve savings by denying hospitals CAH status will have the opposite effect. "If we close hospitals in rural America, we will not save money," she says. "We will move patients to more urban areas and we will actually be spending more."

For more on the Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award, click on: <http://tinyurl.com/ladmp2bw>.