

A promise to do what's best for the community keeps a rural hospital strong



Island Hospital, a 43-bed county hospital in rural Anacortes, Wash., (population 16,000) is a healthy hospital building a healthier community. But there were lean times before Vince Oliver came on board as its president and CEO in 2000.

At the time, the hospital had overextended itself beyond its primary service area and had begun to lose its community identity, Oliver recalls. "We needed to retrench and focus on what we did best and what is core to the community," which Oliver says are providing strong primary care, surgery and orthopedics services and emergency care.

"We made a promise to do our best to provide that care 100% of the time, every day of the year," he says. That promise became the hospital's guiding mission statement: "Your best health care experience begins at Island Hospital. We always place your emotional and medical needs first and foremost."

The hospital's promise to its community helps explain why Oliver is the recipient of the 2015 Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award. Named for the first director of the AHA's Section for Small and Rural Hospitals, the award recognizes the accomplishments of small or ru-

ral hospital leaders who have improved health care in their communities.

Island Hospital's quality and range of services belie its size. It is one of the smallest hospitals in Washington to provide level III trauma care.

A three-year-old Medical Arts Pavilion – designed from the ground up with input from nurses and patients – houses a cancer care center on the second floor that includes fused-glass artwork and bay windows that overlook picturesque Fidalgo Bay by the North Puget Sound. The pavilion also provides physical, occupational and speech therapy and advanced wound care, among other services.

Oliver helped to develop, along with other local hospital CEOs, a health information exchange called the Medical Information Network-North Sound or MIN-IS. It reaches across gaps in connectivity between hospitals, clinics and other health care services in Skagit and Island counties, allowing providers at different locations on different electronic and paper systems to securely share patient care information.

Oliver says it's an example of how caregivers are working together to better coordinate care to help ensure that patients get the care they need in the community and to reduce unnecessary patient readmissions to the hospital.

He likens Island Hospital's various departments as parts of one organism dedicated to a common purpose. "It's all about providing the health care that the community wants and needs," he says. "That's what we focus our time and energy on. Fifteen years ago, we had a vision of what health care should be like for the community and I think it is coming to fruition."

The hospital works with several larger organizations on strategic initiatives, such as telemedicine, physician recruitment and accountable care networks.

It considered affiliating with a large hospital

system a few years ago, but opted to remain independent.

"I didn't see anything [in an affiliation] that would have helped us improve what we are able to do for our patients and community," Oliver says. "We say to our partners, 'we want to work with you, but affiliation isn't in our playbook.'"

The hospital's community roots are strong. When the county stopped funding mental health services for the school district, the hospital stepped in to offer support. Recognizing that earlier intervention means savings in health care costs later, the Island Hospital Foundation in 2011 pledged to provide five years of funding for a mental health intervention program at \$60,000 annually.

A mental health therapist is at the middle school and high school one day a week to help kids in grades 7 to 12, who are often referred by school counselors. The program last year received the Washington State Hospital Association's Community Health Leadership Award. The partnership today includes the city police department and local business organizations. "People have come together because they recognize the need, and that is what improving community health is all about," Oliver says.

To help maintain vibrant rural communities, Oliver believes rural health care providers need regulatory relief and fairer reimbursement policies coming out of Washington, D.C. He notes that many rural hospitals, like Island Hospital, serve not just as a health care safety net, but also as an economic anchor for their communities.

"The AHA has done a phenomenal job in working to help preserve rural health care and helping [policymakers] understand how important rural hospitals are to their communities," Oliver says. "We have to continue to fight that battle and ensure that our rural hospitals survive."



Oliver