

‘Everything we do is primary care’

Grace Cottage’s health care model primed for success

By BOB AUDETTE
Brattleboro Reformer

TOWNSHEND — If you were to look at the Green Mountain Care Board’s review of the financial results for Vermont’s 14 medical hospitals for fiscal year 2018, you would notice Grace Cottage Hospital’s budget versus revenue showed a 2.4 percent loss. But that doesn’t mean the critical care facility in Townshend is actually losing money, said Stephen Brown, Grace Cottage’s chief financial officer. “It is misleading,” said Brown,

who’s been keeping tabs on the hospital’s budget for more than 30 years. “This doesn’t show operating losses. This shows how hospitals didn’t meet what they budgeted.” Drawing up a budget 18 months in advance while considering all the variables that must be taken into account can be difficult, he said. “But truthfully, coming to within 3 percent of a budgeted amount is damn good,” said Brown. Douglas DiVello, Grace Cottage’s chief executive officer, said recent news reports might give the wrong impression that Grace Cottage is struggling to make

ends meet. “We don’t want a graph that is misleading to create the perception in the community that we are the next Springfield Hospital,” he said. “We are clearly moving in the right direction.” On Wednesday, Springfield Hospital announced it was closing its birthing center June 1, one of a number of measures trustees are taking to address nearly \$7 million in losses last year. That deficit forced the hospital to cut 27 jobs and reduce wages. That’s not going to happen at Grace Cottage, said DiVello.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY DAVID BARNUM
Denise Bartlett, a phlebotomist at Grace Cottage Hospital, takes a blood sample from Jackie Brown.

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A CURE FOR CABIN FEVER

Thirty vendors filled the River Garden in Brattleboro as part of a two-day Cabin Fever Marketplace event Friday. Above: Leigh Niland lifts her son, Xander Niland-Gill, 3, onto the lap of the Easter Bunny. Right: Craig Stevens, owner of Wild Hart Distillery, pours a sample.

PHOTOS BY KRISTOPHER RADDER
BRATTLEBORO REFORMER



Pole vaulter, 84, sets sights on more records

By LISA RATHKE
The Associated Press

BURLINGTON — An 84-year-old pole vaulter isn’t putting her pole down anytime soon. Flo Filion Meiler departed Thursday for the World Masters Athletics Championship Indoor in Poland, where she’ll compete in events including the long jump, 60-meter hurdles, 800-meter run, pentathlon and pole vault, for which she’s the shoo-in. The petite, energetic woman from Shelburne, Vermont, said she feels more like 70 than nearly 85. “But you know, I do train five days a week. And when I found out I was going to compete at the worlds, I’ve been training six days a week because



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Florence “Flo” Filion Meiler, an 84-year-old record-setting pole vaulter, poses while training at the University of Vermont indoor track in Burlington.

I knew I would really get my body in shape,” she said last week, after track and field training at the

University of Vermont. But she literally won’t have any competition in the pole vault in the champion-

ships, which runs March 24-31 in Torun, Poland. She is the only one registered in her age group, 80-84, for the sport, for which she set a world record at age 80. In the men’s pole vault, nine men are listed as competing in that age group. Meiler said she the events she likes the best are the hurdles and the pole vault — one of the more daring track and field events, in which competitors run while carrying a fiberglass or composite pole, brace it against the ground to launch themselves over a high bar, and land on a mat. “You really have to work at that,” she said. “You have to have the upper core and you have to have timing, and I just love it because it’s challenging.”

POLE VAULTER, Page 6

Jaws of Life used after head-on crash

Reformer staff

SPOFFORD, N.H. — Emergency responders were dispatched to Route 9 at just before 8 a.m. for a report of a head-on crash between a pickup truck and box truck. The crash occurred near the intersection of Route 9 and Maple Street and forced traffic to detour on to Route 9A for several hours. Emergency responders extracted the driver from the box truck and the New Hampshire State Police conducted an investigation. “Weather was a challenge,” Spofford Fire Chief Steve Dumont said. Early morning precipitation included snow, sleet and rain. At this time, it is unknown if the weather contributed to the crash. “The box truck was at a

precarious angle,” Dumont said. “We had to use our stabilizers as well as the Jaws of Life and some cribbing to keep it safe while we removed the patient.” One driver was transported to Cheshire Medical Center in Keene and the other to Brattleboro Memorial Hospital. Their conditions are not known at this time. Dumont thanked firefighters from Keene, Westmoreland and Chesterfield for their assistance, as well as the Chesterfield Police Department and the New Hampshire State Police. Prior to receiving the report of the Route 9 crash, Spofford firefighters were assisting the Chesterfield Fire Department with an earlier crash on Route 63.



KRISTOPHER RADDER — BRATTLEBORO REFORMER
Spofford, Westmoreland and Keene responder crews responded to a head-on crash between a pickup truck and a box truck on Route 9, in Spofford, N.H., Friday.

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Care

FROM PAGE 1
PREDICTING A BUDGET

Even though it appears Grace Cottage lost \$460,000 in fiscal year 2018, just looking at that number doesn't give someone the complete picture, Brown explained.

“Our bottom line is not a negative number,” he said. “The number that is represented in the report is our patient care revenue minus our operating expenses. This does not look at the hospital’s bottom line, which includes philanthropy, non-operating revenue and investments.”

In fact, said Andrea Seaton, director of Development & Community Relations, Grace Cottage’s endowment is a healthy \$7 million and each year it receives between \$1.2 million and \$1.5 million in donations that go to cover the difference between what was budgeted for operating expenses versus what the hospital actually received for the care it provided.

While Brown can predict, for example, that Grace Cottage might get 1,000 patient visits per year, what services those patients require will vary depending on the circumstances of each of those 1,000 people.

“I have to think about how many patients we might have in the year, but also what types of patients,” Brown said.

“Every patient is different,” DiVello said. “And you don't know what you're going to get paid because every patient has a different payer source. You don't know what it's going to cost to manufacture an episode of care because every patient has different health care needs.”

In addition, Brown has to budget for maintenance of the facility, cost-of-living increases for Grace Cottage’s employees, heating oil, electricity, supplies and services, and contracts with outside vendors.

“All of those expenses keep going up,” DiVello said. “Meanwhile, the adjustments in reimbursement from the federal government have been going down.”

“If not down, they don't go up nearly the same as the rate of inflation,” added Brown.

DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

About 60 percent of the reimbursements Grace Cottage receives comes from the federal government in the form of Medicare and Medicaid payments, Brown said. The rest comes from commercial insurance providers, each of which he has to negotiate with to determine how much Grace Cottage will receive for the care it provides its covered patients.

“The sad reality is, more hospitals than not lose money just on operating expenses,” DiVello said. “It’s because the federal government woefully underpays for health care.”

DiVello said the 2020 budget proposed by the White House, if approved by Congress, could be the death knell for many small community hospitals around the country.

The proposed budget calls for \$1.5 trillion in cuts from

2020 through 2029 by repealing the Affordable Care Act’s expansion of the program and converting overall funding to a block grant or per capita caps to states. However, many budget analysts note the White House’s proposal is probably “dead on arrival,” as there’s not much appetite in Congress to cut programs that directly benefit constituents.

Even, in a worse-case scenario where the proposed budget is approved, DiVello said, “We don’t anticipate it would be a death knell for Grace Cottage. The communities that we serve have been extremely generous and that’s incredibly helpful for us.”

In fact, DiVello said, over the past half-dozen years or so, Grace Cottage’s operating budget and its revenues from patient care have been getting closer each year.

“The Green Mountain Care’s report shows we’re the only hospital in Vermont where the operating margin is actually trending up,” said Seaton.

“Our goal is to break even on operations and use the philanthropic and investment income and other sources of income as ways to supplement the need and to invest in new services and programs,” DiVello said.

That’s not true in many hospitals around the country, especially those that are operated for profit or have shareholders to answer to.

“A lot of hospital CEOs and CFOs are trying to figure out how to increase profits,” he said. “How do they perform more procedures and surgeries to add to their bottom lines. To me that’s counter-intuitive. Do we really want people to be sicker so that they use us more so that we generate more volume and more revenue? Grace Cottage is the antithesis of that kind of mindset.”

A UNIQUE HEALTH CARE MODEL

Grace Cottage is focused on keeping its customers healthy so they don’t have to go to the hospital for more serious, and more expensive, care, he said. “Everything we do is primary care. That is the economic engine for our business. It’s all about reducing the cost of health care by keeping people healthy. And that doesn’t hurt us as a hospital because we don’t rely on sick people to generate income.”

While hospitals around the country are merging or offering services through affiliations, DiVello said, that’s not in Grace Cottage’s business plan.

“We don’t see any need to be formally affiliated with another health care system because we are so unique in what we do,” he said. “Our average daily census has actually gone up. We are looking at ways to refer fewer patients to other health care organizations, trying to keep as many here at Grace Cottage because it’s what we do.”

However, Grace Cottage does make referrals for more serious procedures or for surgery to other hospitals, such as Brattleboro Memorial, Cheshire Medical Center in Keene, N.H., and Dartmouth

Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, N.H.

NATIONWIDE CHALLENGES

Grace Cottage could see even more patients if not for the problem of not having enough providers.

“Medical schools are not providing enough primary care providers to meet the growing demand,” DiVello said. “Economically there is not a lot of incentive to produce primary care providers because they don’t get paid nearly as well as specialists and proceduralists.”

Many hospitals are making up for this national dearth in primary care providers with advanced practice registered nurses, he said.

“Here at Grace Cottage we have a nice mix of doctors and advanced practice providers,” DiVello said. “But a lot of organizations can’t recruit doctors at all. ERs all over the nation are staffed solely by nurse practitioners with no physicians on the schedule at all.”

DiVello admitted the United States spends an incredible amount of money on health care.

“It’s frightening to think about,” he said.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, in 2017, the United States spent about \$3.5 trillion, or 18 percent of GDP, on health care, which is more than twice the average among developed countries. Of that amount, the

federal government pays \$1.5 trillion, a number that is expected to rise to \$2.9 trillion in 10 years, or nearly 10 percent of the economy.

“Because the price tag is enormous,” DiVello said, “there’s the question of where do you take the money? With the chaos in Washington right now, they can’t even decide on what time to take lunch.”

DiVello pointed out that Grace Cottage is responsible for only .7 percent of health care spending in Vermont.

In fact, Brown said, Vermont has 14 hospitals and 13 of them together aren’t as big as the University of Vermont Medical Center, which accounts for half of the health care spending in the state.

“Obviously, Vermont can’t afford to lose any of its hospitals,” DiVello said. Fortunately, he said, Grace Cottage is well-positioned to handle whatever the market or Washington, D.C., send its way.

“We are a not-for-profit critical access hospital, owned by the community,” DiVello said. “We are a community asset governed by a board of directors who are all volunteers. Their job is to make sure the asset is protected, safe and viable and can survive to meet the needs of the community.”

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To submit an obituary

Email: obits@reformer.com or call 413-496-6357

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In Memoriam

Phyllis Benay
James C. Cappy
Jonathan Flaccus
Cynthia Payne-Meyer
Richard E. Williams
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CYNTHIA PAYNE-MEYER
CHANGE IN SERVICES
3/14/2019

Brattleboro - Due to the adverse road conditions on South Street, the services in celebration of the life of Cynthia Payne-Meyer has been changed. The service will be held at the Centre Congregational Church on Main Street on Sunday starting at 3 P.M.

To view her full obituary please visit www.atamaniuk.com.

JAMES C. CAPPY
11/17/1943 - 1/18/2019

A memorial service and celebration of Jim’s life will be held on Sunday, March 31, at 1 p.m. at the Stone Church, 210 Main Street, Brattleboro. All are welcome to attend and share their memories of Jim. Donations may be made to the Southern Poverty Law Center at <http://bit.ly/Jim-Cappy>

Richard E. Williams



Funeral services with military honors for Richard E. Williams who passed away December 21, 2018 in Zephyr Hills, Florida, will be held Saturday March 30, 2019 at 11am at the Jacksonville Community Church. Visiting hours will be held Friday March 29, 2019 from 4-6pm at Covey Allen & Shea Funeral Home. Interment will be held later in the spring. The family has entrusted arrangements to the care of Covey Allen & Shea Funeral Home 44 East Main Street Wilmington, VT.



PHYLLIS BENAY
11/8/1951 - 3/13/2019

Phyllis Benay left this world on an unseasonably warm evening in March after seven miraculous years living with lung cancer. Many will remember her as an inspired and brilliant professor at Keene State College, where she taught expository writing and directed the writing center for more than 25 years. Others knew her as a gardener-tending to her perennials and vegetables with ungloved hands, deep in the soil, cherishing her consultations with the knowledgeable staff of the Walker Farm; or as a birder, leading the Southern Vermont Audubon Society chapter around her marsh in search of wood ducks and thrushes; or as a mother and grandmother, making up songs and poems on the spot, sending the perfect gifts, giving the most comforting hugs. Although she was all of those things, most of us will remember Phyllis as a woman who exuded warmth, relished intellectual debate, and brought people from diverse walks of life together, on her back deck, for food, laughter, and love. She is survived by her devoted daughter, Erin, her two beloved grandsons Ari & Ben, her son-in-law, Matthew, her mother, Dorothy, and dozens of friends with whom she shared countless summer evenings of passionate conversation. Her memorial will be held at 11:00am at the Wilder Cemetery in Dummerston on May, 11, 2019. In lieu of flowers, charitable donations may be made to Southeastern Vermont Audubon Society. <https://southeasternvtas.blogspot.com/>

Jonathan Flaccus

2/20/2019



hitchhiked to California every summer vacation. After he graduated and married his first wife Linda Bryson, the couple traveled for 9 months in Europe and North Africa. In 1969 he began a five-month solo trip, hitchhiking through most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In 1974 he left filmmaking for good and spent a year and a half traveling rough in Japan, Indonesia, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, New Zealand, and Australia.

In 1976, he purchased and renovated a Victorian house on Main St. in Putney. To furnish his house he went to local auctions and found himself enjoying the experience and wondered if he could make a living buying and selling antiques. Beginning with antique furniture and art, and soon expanding into photography, antiquarian books, and ephemera, the Unique Antique filled with items that Jonathan found intrinsically interesting. In an era when most shops were developing specialties, his was a place where one might find a finely carved Fijian war club, signed first editions of poetry, or many examples of “sandpaper pictures,” a form of folk art. Naturally curious, he enjoyed hunting for items and researching them. He became well known for his discerning choices and the breadth and depth of his knowledge. The Unique Antique operated for 38 years, closing in 2014 when Jonathan and his wife Marcy moved to East Dummerston, Vermont.

Once his business was established travel beckoned again. Beginning in the 1980’s he visited Senegal, Gambia, and Cameroon.

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