



3-minute case study: Rural trauma care takes flight

By Erin Graham | January 10, 2019

The problem

Critically injured people in rural communities are less likely than urbanites to be treated at trauma centers — and are much more likely to die in the first 24 hours after their injury.

Even though risk factors for trauma are higher in rural areas, rural hospitals often don't have the resources to perform comprehensive trauma care — from emergency specialists to sophisticated diagnostic equipment and blood supplies.

That was a big concern for the 2,300 citizens of rural Holyoke, Colorado, which is about a 2.5-hour ambulance ride away from the nearest major trauma center. Emergency medical helicopter transport services were often too far out of range and unreliable. Trampas Hutches, CEO of Holyoke's Melissa Memorial Hospital, found the situation unacceptable.

"Where you live shouldn't determine whether you live or die," he says.

The solution

Hutches couldn't do anything about the lack of proximity to a major trauma center. But he could do something about access to medical flights.

First, he gathered data. He visited other critical access hospitals in neighboring regions to determine the number of flights they sent from their hospitals, learn what service they used, and identify their pain points.

Many shared Melissa Memorial's problem: They were on the outer range of helicopter service, and once a helicopter arrived, it often had to refuel before patients could be transported, wasting precious time.

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Memorial and using it to service an area of about 12,000 square miles. "Collaboration is key to surviving in rural healthcare," he says. "I felt like a politician, going all around to [the health systems] to find out if we had this service, would they use it?"

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Hutches took a leap of faith. In May 2018, AirLife by HealthOne was stationed at Melissa Memorial. It can now be dispatched 24/7 out of Holyoke to Northern, Central, and Southwestern Nebraska; Northwestern and Central Kansas; Southeastern Wyoming; and Northeastern, Eastern, and Central Colorado.

The flight crew – a pilot, two medical clinicians, and a dedicated mechanic – stays on-site in four apartments HealthOne leases in the hospital's resident building, located next to the helicopter pad.

The outcome

AirLife has been consistently in demand. Instead of waiting 30 minutes or longer for a helicopter, as they had to in the past, patients in trauma throughout the region can now expect a helicopter in 15-20 minutes. And within five minutes, they're up in the air, with no wait to refuel – and they're on their way to life-saving care.

"It's satisfying knowing that we pulled this off, and our small town has this service; people have a chance to survive," says Hutches. "Never accept defeat."

Erin Graham is a frequent contributor to athenaInsight.

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