

UMMC seeks to lease struggling Delta hospital

Mississippi Today
by Will Stribling

Sharkey Issaquena Community Hospital may begin negotiations with the University of Mississippi Medical Center over a potential lease of the rural, 29-bed hospital and all of its operations, including its nursing home, clinics, emergency department and ambulance services for the two counties.

After seeking out potential buyers earlier this year, the community hospital received lease proposals from UMMC and Delta Health System. The committee that evaluated the proposals, which included representatives from both counties and the community hospital, chose the Medical Center over Delta Health System, which has its own financial problems and recently closed the only neonatal intensive care unit in the Mississippi Delta.

“Due to the economics of the hospital, particularly during COVID, they sought a partner that would strengthen their ability to serve the community,” said Charles Weissinger, attorney for the Issaquena County Board of Supervisors and one of the Issaquena County representatives on the committee that evaluated the lease proposals. “They went through a request for proposal process and the University of Mississippi Medical Center provided the best hope for results going forward.”

UMMC declined to comment for the story.

Details of the proposal submitted by the Medical Center are not publicly available due a provision in state law that exempts “records directly relating to prospective strategic business decisions of a public hospital.”

UMMC is also working to finalize a lease of Greenwood Leflore Hospital.

Sharkey Issaquena Community Hospital, like many rural hospitals across the country, has struggled to stay afloat for years due to low patient volumes. The two counties have a collective population of fewer than 6,000 people.

To cut costs, the community hospital, which has 125 full-time employees, has been pooling its resources with small hospitals across the state over the last few months to buy supplies at a discounted wholesale rate. Though the arrangement is beneficial for all the involved hospitals, it’s not enough for Sharkey Issaquena Community Hospital to remain viable in its current state, Weissinger said.

The community hospital is jointly owned by Sharkey County, which owns two-thirds of the hospital, and Is-

saquena County, which owns the remaining one-third. The board of supervisors of both counties have greenlit entering into negotiations with the Medical Center to finalize a deal, but the hospital’s board of trustees must also sign off on the plan for negotiations to begin. Their next meeting will be Sept. 29.

UMMC’s efforts to expand have played out amidst its public and contentious fallout with Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi, the state’s largest private insurer.

Sharkey Issaquena Community Hospital, like UMMC, has its own history of legal battles with Blue Cross. In 2017, the insurer sued the community hospital over an alleged lab testing scheme that cost the insurer nearly \$10 million.

Under the alleged scheme, two Texas-based lab testing companies ordered lab tests

for Blue Cross customers in other states and were allowed to submit reimbursement claims to the insurer for the tests by using the hospital’s name and billing information, though the tests were not performed by the hospital’s own laboratory.

The community hospital allegedly received kickbacks from the two Texas companies as part of the deal, which Blue Cross claimed was used to take advantage of the favorable reimbursement rate the hospital received from the insurer for lab tests due to it being small and rural..

Ultimately, nearly \$34 million in misrepresented claims were submitted to Blue Cross, according to court filings, though the insurer only paid for \$9.8 million of them before discovering the arrangement.

The two parties reached a settlement in 2018.

Teach Plus Mississippi Welcomes Teachers to the 2022-23 Policy Fellowship

Jackson, MS — Teach Plus, a national nonprofit that empowers teachers to lead improvements in educational policy and instructional practice, has selected a group of 25 demonstrably effective teachers from around Mississippi for its 2022-2023 Policy Fellowship cohort. Mississippi’s fourth cohort of Policy Fellows will focus on a range of issues of importance to Mississippi teachers, students, and parents, including teacher preparation, mentorship, and retention. The teacher leaders will also continue their efforts to address the mental health needs of students and teachers.

“Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows have been successful in building on the work of previous cohorts by taking advantage of new policy research and advocacy opportunities. Last year alone, our Fellows led a successful advocacy campaign that resulted in the largest teacher pay raise in our state’s history. They also crafted policy recommendations to meet the mental health needs of students and teachers. This new group of teacher leaders will have an opportunity to influence a range of policy decisions, including teacher retention, licensure requirements, and teacher mentorship,” said Sanford Johnson, Executive Director of Teach Plus Mississippi.

Danielle Whittington, a Policy Fellow and 4th Grade teacher from Columbia, stated, “The Teach Plus Policy Fellowship gives us a voice from the trenches, enabling

us to be the change for the needs we see and live daily. I want to use my passion to advocate for those who can’t or won’t, to impact those who need it the most.”

Over half of the new Fellows are teachers of color, reflecting the diversity of Mississippi and its students in multiple ways. They come from districts in the Delta, Metro Jackson, and the Gulf Coast and several communities in between. They have been trained through a variety of educator preparation programs such as traditional undergraduate, master’s programs, and alternative prep programs.

Throughout the fellowship, the Fellows are trained in policy, advocacy, research, and communications and develop the skills necessary to advocate for changes for Mississippi students. Each Fellow was chosen based on their strong commitment to the classroom and to equity, their ability to articulate the needs of their students, and their pursuit of excellence and innovation in their teaching.

Evonie Rash, a Policy Fellow and High School ELA teacher from Hollandale, stated, “As a Policy Fellow, I want to become more active and involved in the policy decisions that affect my children, my students, and my fellow educators. I hope to be a voice for the change that our education system needs.”

The 2022-23 Mississippi Policy Fellow in Holmes County is: Kristin Scott, Holmes County Consolidated School District

BLOCKADE

By Timothy E. Parker

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