

A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

BY MARK ANDERSON

Since its inception, The Villages Health has provided residents with a complete primary care package

Talk to anyone who has been with The Villages for any length of time and they likely will all have one particular sentiment they share about The Villages — the amount of hard work that went in (and continues to go in) to getting The Villages to where it is today.

Without the dedication and long hours of hundreds of individuals who went above and beyond to get the job done, The Villages would look nothing like it does now.

Chairman of The Villages Health Dr. Elliot Sussman knows a thing or two about that hard work and dedication. As one of the founders of The Villages Health along with the Morse family, Sussman helped build The Villages Health from the (in many cases literal) ground up, growing it into the world-class, internationally recognized healthcare system it is today.

Here's the story of The Villages Health, told by Sussman and other members of The Villages Health leadership team.

THE EARLY DAYS

If starting a healthcare system for a community of thousands of residents from scratch sounds like a daunting task, well, that's because it was.

Sussman says the idea grew out of a realization by the Morse family that there was a need for a world-class healthcare system to match other premium outlets The Villages already had come to be known for, including golf, recreation centers and entertainment.

“(The Morse Family was) always very concerned about healthcare because from the get-go they hoped to make a place where people could have their dreams come true,” Sussman said. “It's hard enough to do anyway, but it's impossible to do if you don't have good health. They developed everything else, I think, at a world-class level, whether it was golf courses, recreation centers or town squares. But they never quite got their hands around healthcare, and they were acutely aware of that.”

That's where Sussman came in.



Left to Right:

Jeffrey Lowenkron,
MD, MPP, Chief
Medical Officer

Elliot J. Sussman,
MD, MBA, Chairman,
The Villages Health

Bob Trinh, Chief
Executive Officer

Autumn Tripp,
CMPE, Vice President
of Primary Care



He says executives from the University of South Florida in Tampa requested a meeting to discuss healthcare in The Villages with Gary and Mark Morse, and the USF staff members asked Sussman to attend the meeting with them.

"I didn't know anybody at The Villages at that point, and I had never heard of or been to The Villages, and the people at USF asked if I would come down to help facilitate the meeting," he explained.

Sussman says the meeting went like any other meeting, but afterward, Gary Morse gave him a call to ask if he would come back and talk to him one-on-one about healthcare.

"The conversation basically was, 'I've tried to fix healthcare in this community, and I'm not going to stop, but I think you could really, really help with it. Why don't you move down here and do that?'" Sussman explained. "That began a long conversation, and in the summer of 2010, I agreed to come down here and spend my time trying to figure out what would make the most sense for The Villages community."

Sussman was the first medical professional to hop on board The Villages Health ship — a ship he continues to captain today.

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— Dr. Elliot Sussman



BUILDING A HEALTHCARE SYSTEM FROM SCRATCH

Saying you are going to start a healthcare system is all well and good, but how do you actually get things started, especially with the mountain of logistics you now have to figure out?

Sussman says from the beginning, Gary and Mark Morse strongly reinforced one of The Villages' core values.

"One of the things I learned from Gary and Mark was how important it was to listen to the community," Sussman said. "The first thing we did was actually the largest survey ever of older adults on their health beliefs and behaviors, and we learned a lot from that. We sent out about 85,000 questionnaires, and we got back almost 35,000, which is an amazing response rate."

The survey asked how Villagers felt about their current level of healthcare and what types of services or physicians they wanted for the area.

"What they basically said was they wanted a health system and physicians who listened to them, gave them time and helped them understand what their health issues were and how to stay as healthy as they could



so they could enjoy all the wonderful resources in The Villages," Sussman said.

Sussman says time with the doctor was an issue that frequently popped up on the returned surveys, and he gives an example of what he calls the "door handle sign." In many primary care facilities, you may wait a long time for a doctor, and then when the doctor does finally show up, they keep their hand on the door the entire time they are in the room — like they are waiting to leave, even though they just walked in.

The Villages Health was founded on the principle it would focus on the patients and their experiences, a principle Sussman believes they have stuck to.





“We said from the get-go that (The Villages Health) will be a primary care-driven, community-based, patient-centered health system,” he said. “Those were the three major attributes that I think all of us have stuck to over the ensuing decade.”

Any health system is only as good as its staff and physicians, and Sussman says finding doctors to come work for The Villages Health in the days of its infancy was an uphill battle — especially before the first care center was built.

He recalls meeting with the first doctor he would recruit for The Villages Health, Dr. David Jordahl. Their meeting was quite by chance — a realtor learned Jordahl was visiting the area and asked Sussman if he was able to schedule a time to meet with him.

“I’m looking at a blank schedule — ‘Oh yeah, I think so!’” Sussman said. “I met Dave, and at that time we had decided where the first care center would go — the current Colony Care Center across from Colony Plaza. It was flat — just sand. I said to Dave, ‘There’s going to be a great care center here.’ He said, ‘Where is it?’ And I said, ‘It’s going to be here — it’s going to be great.’ (Laughs)”

Jordahl would eventually join the team, a moment that helped solidify what they were attempting to accomplish.

“I think that was really proof of concept that what we were doing here could be attractive,” Sussman said. “It was building a health system from scratch.”

A ONE-STOP SHOP

From the beginning, The Villages Health was designed to be a “one-stop shop” for all its patients.

Rather than send patients elsewhere for specialist care, The Villages Health instead offers everything in one place — something many Villages residents mentioned in their survey responses.

Dr. Jeffrey Lowenkron, The Villages Health Chief Medical Officer, breaks down the organization’s approach.

“If someone came to see me with three problems, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services doesn’t want me taking care of those three,” he explained. “They won’t pay me, but if I send them to three different people, they’ll pay everybody. So that payment model, driven by ‘fee for service,’ drives short visits and fragmented care. You can understand why, as a person with those three problems, you might be frustrated that you couldn’t get the person you wanted to see to take care of you.”

Autumn Tripp is a Certified Medical Practice Executive and the Vice President of Primary Care with The Villages Health, and she uses audiology services as an example of the type of all-in-one care offered by the organization.

Because hearing can be tied to other health issues as we age, Tripp says catching auditory health issues early can help detect other medical concerns as well.

“We also know that people who have diminished hearing often suffer levels of depression and when you have depression, you’re less likely to take care of your chronic conditions — take your blood pressure medication, manage your diabetes, etc.,” she explained. “It was felt that by encouraging healthy hearing, we also encourage other future healthy behaviors, including the social aspect of their life, which is huge here in The Villages.”

Eye care is another similar issue that often is not frequently checked through a primary care provider, and Sussman says where many primary care



physicians would tell patients to take a trip across town for a separate appointment, The Villages Health is able to just take the patient down the hallway.

“Typically, the way this is done is, ‘Oh, you haven’t had your eyes checked, I’m going to send you to another office and make an appointment,’” he explained. “It’s another day and you get in your golf car or car and drive somewhere and see the ophthalmologist. That’s not patient-centered, that’s doctor-centered.”

A SYSTEM THAT WORKS

Currently, The Villages Health boasts more than 70 board-certified physicians, along with more than 600 employees and 60,000 patients.

In March, The Villages Health earned a Net Promoter Score of 95. Ranked on a scale from -100 to 100, the Net Promoter Score is an index measuring customer experience, with anything above a 70 or 80 generally considered exceptional. In a March press release, Villages Health Executive Director of Sales and Marketing Emilio Noble said the organization’s score of 95 is well above other international companies, including Costco with a 79, USAA at 75 and Ritz-Carlton Hotels with a score of 68.

“We are thrilled to receive such strong affirmation from our patients that we are providing exceptional care and service,” Noble said. “We know receiving the best healthcare possible is paramount to quality of life for our patients and we strive to be the best. Receiving this incredible score tells us we are doing just that.”





THE VILLAGES HEALTH STATS

70+ Board-Certified Physicians

600+ Employees

60,000+ Patients

NET PROMOTER SCORE



LOOKING FORWARD

Sussman says The Villages Health has multiple irons in the fire — things they are not ready to discuss yet but things they are looking forward to in the coming months and years. Though its healthcare system now is more than a decade in the making, The Villages Health continues to make changes and improvements as time goes on.

“I remember how Mr. Morse — Gary Morse — used to end almost every meeting of folks who worked for The Villages with the phrase, ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet,’” Sussman said. “My sense of our group is really energetic, really creative, really innovative and really hard-working, and I understand we can always do better. There’s a sense of humility that (the awards we’ve won) are great, but we can do better.”

BRINGING IN NEW TALENT

Dr. Rachel Walk is an internal medicine doctor and she only recently started with The Villages Health earlier this year after learning about the Villages Health’s care model and wanting to join the team.

“I decided to explore my options because I really felt like the model was something I had been yearning for,” Walk said. “I think it’s the model that we need to be practicing for medicine, and I was trying to do that up in Michigan in a ‘fee for service’ model, and it just wasn’t working.”

Since joining The Villages Health, Walk says she is able to spend more time with patients.

“I really like being able to spend time with my patients and not feel rushed and be able to get to know them,” she said. “Their health can so often be centered around what’s going on outside the office and outside their actual condition, so I’ve been able to do that. Hopefully I’ll develop some strong relationships with them.”

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— Dr. Rachel Walk

LOCATIONS:

- Brownwood Care Center
- Colony Care Center
- Creekside Care Center
- Mulberry Grove Care Center
- Pinellas Care Center
- Santa Barbara Care Center
- Specialty Care at Spanish Springs
- Specialty Care at the Center for Advanced Healthcare at Brownwood



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