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The Villages Health marks its 10th year

By Leah Schwarting, Daily Sun Specialty Editor
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Dr. Faustino Macuha, of The Villages Health Specialty Care at the Center for Advanced Health Care at Brownwood, examines Donna Cordero, of the Village of Sanibel. The Villages Health, a patient-focused, patient-driven system, opened its first care center 10 years ago.

Bill Mitchell, Daily Sun

Almost 10 years ago, the Nemeths saw a face in the Daily Sun they'd known for decades. "I said, 'Oh, my God, Dr. Betts is here!'" Joan Nemeth said. Dr. Brooks Betts may joke he followed the Nemeths from Pennsylvania, but an invitation to follow The Villages Health's chairman, Dr. Elliot Sussman, to The Villages presented the golden opportunity to escape a volume-based health care system. Sussman directed a patient-focused, patient-driven health care system from its conceptual stages, making it inviting for his former medical colleague to settle into the Village Health Colony Care Center, the community's first. "Nowhere else was I going to have the opportunity to spend a half hour or hour with patients and have the opportunity to care for them properly," Betts said.

It's now been 10 years since The Villages Health began seeing patients. What started in Colony now boasts seven primary, and two specialty, care centers. Its 667 staff serves more than 60,000 patients, many of whom are new to Florida.

"These folks that are moving here, they need to find a new primary care physician, they need to find new specialists, and so that's to me driving a lot of the growth of The Villages Health," said Bob Trinh, TVH chief executive officer. "And people that are coming here, I always say they work hard throughout life and they want to take advantage of the great lifestyle that The Villages offers. But, in order to do that, you've got to stay healthy."

Villages founders Harold Schwartz and H. Gary Morse worked tirelessly to make a hospital a reality in The Villages 20 years ago, but it needed more. It needed a heightened primary care system that focused on keeping patients well and out of the hospital.

At the time, Sussman was a facilitator in having Villages officials meet with the University of South Florida about future health care possibilities. When that meeting concluded, Morse turned to Sussman, asking him to direct making health care first-class in The Villages. After about eight months of discussion and a handshake arrangement, Sussman began working on a system that would put the patient first.

"I don't know what this is going to be, but I'm really intrigued by this," Sussman recalled saying at the time.

As TVH's founding chairman, he worked with the University of South Florida to craft a survey that would truly hear what the residents wanted. Unprecedented for typical survey response, more than 30,000 residents participated, providing Sussman with feedback on how to further develop the health care system here.

Morse fully supported the patient-centered approach.

“Medicare is a lifesaving program, but it has been set up in such a way that doctors are no longer able to care for us senior citizens in the same manner that we grew up with,” he told the Daily Sun in 2012.

Putting Patients First

Most health systems work in a traditional fee for service model, said Dr. Jeff Lowenkron, TVH chief medical officer.

“And the way that payment model has been working for a long time is they offer lots of rewards for tests and procedures,” he said. “Very little reward for thinking about patients. Very little reward for coordination of care.”

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services pays the most per hour for 15-minute visits, Lowenkron said. As a result, health care can get fragmented.

It was that kind of model Betts wanted to escape. Many of his patients are over 65, he said, and have multiple medical problems he has to address.

“I don’t know how you can do that in 15 minutes,” Betts said. “I know how I used to try and do it, and that’s why I left that kind of care.”

Basically, patients said they’d like to have more time, Lowenkron said. They wanted someone who knew them, and to have care built around their needs.

“And, ideally, what that meant was building out schedules that had longer times,” he said. “So that’s how we designed it.”

And The Villages had a pretty good idea of what residents wanted, as they’d surveyed thousands of Villagers on the subject.

Some wanted care they were getting from back home. In fact, that’s what the Nemeths, of the Village of Tamarind Grove, were doing.

“When we moved down here, we were here a year or so, but we were still doing our doctor visits up North,” Henry Nemeth said. “We hadn’t changed.”

After a while they decided they needed a primary care doctor in Florida in case something happened.

“Well, nothing happened, but then right after that I see (Betts’) name was in the paper and Colony was open,” Nemeth said.

Volume-less health care

To make sure patients got the time they needed, TVH doctors receive a salary, one divorced from how many patients they see daily.

The practice sizes are also capped at 1,250 patients, which are served by a doctor, a nurse-practitioner or physician’s assistant, and three support staff.

The Villages Health model also allows for smoother communication between primary and specialty care systems.

“With the care center model, I think that there is a really good communication in terms of our relationship with our primary care providers,” said Dr. Faustino Macuha, an endocrinologist at the Specialty Care Center at the Center for Advanced Healthcare at Brownwood. “We have the same electronic medical record system. They are free to communicate with us formally and informally through this electronic medical record. It’s just, I think, a very seamless access between specialty and primary.”

To help get things started, The Villages Health acquired the Family Doctors of Belleview, which was widely praised for its patient care. The University of South Florida was also brought in to build up the specialty care offerings with the ultimate goal of turning them over to The Villages.

The first wave of employees consisted of 90 staff members, including Villager Patricia Tubbs, who had previously volunteered to talk to groups about the importance of participating in that community-wide survey. She’s still there, serving as the human resources project manager.

“It has to be cool for me to be here still 10 years when my previous job was working on Olympic games and traveling all around the world,” she said.

The first years weren't without challenges. TVH was a unique system, and things moved fast after Colony Care Center opened its doors.

"There was a lot of excitement about the new model, and the problem was we had to go from zero to 60 miles an hour if you will in very short order," Sussman said.

It was about getting it right, he said, having the right resources, people and training.

"The good news was we had very, very wise and patient parents if you will, namely The Villages, who were ready with their resources and advice to help," he said. "Now this was obviously a different initiative than what was usual in The Villages, so there was a lot of learning we had to just come by on our own."

Tubbs agrees.

"They used to say, especially in the first three, four years, that we were flying a plane while we were building it," she said.

However, while the plane looks built out these days, TVH's efforts to make the community healthier go beyond doctor-patient interactions. They offer wellness classes and played an instrumental role in expanding health care offerings in The Villages.

Continuing the Vision

Early in its development, Brownwood was eyed as a site for expanding health care opportunities. It was in 2016 when planning began for what Sussman coined a "bedless hospital," at the time. The Center for Advanced Healthcare at Brownwood would pull in an array of medical specialists and ancillary services under one roof, conveniently for the patients. It would even provide outpatient surgical procedures, giving patients the opportunity to recover at home or the adjacent Brownwood Hotel & Spa, rather than unnecessarily staying in a hospital at a higher expense.

Sussman and Lowenkron were instrumental in the center's early design stages, figuring out how big it would be and what kind of infrastructure it needed.

TVH also played a big role identifying services and programs that would be offered in the center, according to Braulio Vicente Jr., TVH chief operating officer.

The four-story, 240,000-square-foot facility officially opened its doors in June 2020, the middle of the pandemic.

“It was a delicate situation,” Vicente said. “We had to basically open the building and provide services to the community with the precautions we needed to put in place, you know, temperature-checking people when they walked in, mask-wearing, etc.”

There were little to no visits at first, Trinh said.

“You know, now it’s extremely busy,” he said.

The center currently houses 13 medical specialties, including TVH’s primary specialty care location.

It’s not the newest facility, though. That distinction goes to the Lake Deaton Care Center, which opened in October 2021 for primary care.

TVH isn’t done growing, either. It serves a booming population, one that isn’t slowing down.

“I believe that as The Villages community continues to grow, The Villages Health will continue to grow as well to support the patient population in the community,” said Cheri Benedetti, Villages Health vice president of human resources.

TVH keeps in contact with The Villages about when and where growth is occurring. That allows the organization to project when it needs a new care center.

Currently, plans are underway for a new care center in Eastport sometime in 2025.

Moving forward, Vicente said TVH wants to continue to grow and meet the needs of the community while not sacrificing quality service and patient experience.

Both aspects are closely monitored. In 2021, 146 of TVH’s Medicare Advantage patients per 1,000 went to the hospital, Trinh said. That’s lower than the national measure, which is 249 per 1,000.

Then there’s TVH’s net promoter scores, a widely used measure of customer loyalty. It’s considered the gold standard for customer experience, and any score above 80 is considered “world-class.”

The Villages Health consistently scores in the 90s.

Betts makes the Nemeths feel important, Joan said.

“You don’t come in and chase us out,” she said. “You sit here and listen to us and our problems.”

For Betts, TVH rekindled his love of medicine. When he first arrived, he only intended to stick around for three years.

Now, he’s approaching 10.

“I think that says it all,” Betts said. “I mean, I’m still practicing medicine.”

“And you’re still enjoying it?” Joan asked.

“And still enjoying medicine,” Betts said. “I’m enjoying medicine a lot more than I did in the previous practice because of the nature of the way we do things around here — that we have the ability to actually treat patients the way patients should be treated.”

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