

New medical partnership aims to boost care for Sonoma, Mendocino coast

MARTIN ESPINOZA

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North Coast medical providers are teaming up with Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital to form a new partnership that will expand access to health care services for communities along the Mendocino and Sonoma coasts.

The new network will focus on in-demand health care prevention and wellness programs; improving emergency and urgent care services; chronic disease management; and expanding access to specialty care.

Branded the Mendonoma Health Alliance, the network makes official an existing tie among three providers: St. Joseph Health Sonoma County, which runs Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital; the Redwood Coast Medical Services, which operates health clinics in Gualala and Point Arena; and Coast Life Support District, which provides ambulance and paramedic services.

“There’s been a long history of collaboration. What the Mendonoma alliance creates is a more formal structure to work together in a kind of bigger way,” said Bonnie Noble, network director for the partnership.

Noble said the group received federal funding from the Health Resources & Services Administration in July to pay for strategic planning. The group met in July, September and November for several planning sessions that also included members of the coastal community. It only recently announced its formal partnership.

Jaynie Boren, St. Joseph Health’s Northern California regional vice president of strategic services, said coastal communities have their own unique socio-economic, geographic and environmental factors that affect individual health and well-being.

“That’s why this expanded collaboration and health care network is so important,” Boren said. “It is designed to support the health of important rural communities based on these communities’ unique needs.”

Boren said residents in these communities usually have to travel about two hours to reach a hospital. The only medical services available to them are urgent care and some primary care.

The planning sessions held earlier this year helped identify several health care fronts for greater collaboration. They include:

- Spearheading prevention and wellness initiatives that help people avoid high blood pressure.
- Using Memorial Hospital resources to expand emergency services.
- Better management of chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and chronic depression.
- Greater access to specialty care, which initially may involve providing transportation for patients to come to Santa Rosa and scheduling medical specialists to visit the coast periodically.

Noble said often when a coastal patient ends up at Memorial Hospital for treatment of complications of some chronic illness, there is insufficient communication between the hospital and the patient's primary care provider at a Redwood Coast Medical Services clinic.

The network will lead to better coordination of care, where providers "work more closely together so things don't fall through the cracks," Noble said.

Noble said specialty care is one of the biggest challenges. Ultimately, the new alliance hopes to establish a robust system of telemedicine so that patients and specialists need not travel.

The Mendonoma Health Alliance is scheduled to host a final strategic planning session in February.

You can reach Staff Writer Martin Espinoza at 707-521-5213 or martin.espinoza@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter [@renofish](https://twitter.com/renofish).