

Argus Courier - Physicians' group seeks greater role in hiring new doctors

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## **PHYSICIANS' GROUP SEEKS GREATER ROLE IN HIRING NEW DOCTORS**

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An alliance of local doctors is hoping play a much more active role in interviewing, hiring and acclimating new physicians.

This intention of the South Sonoma County Medical Group was announced by Dr. Bob Ostroff, its president, and Wayne Fairchild, a consultant who formerly was the vice president of operations of Petaluma Valley Hospital, at the Petaluma Health Care District board meeting last month.

They emphasized that the proposal they presented was basically a draft, and was designed to give board members a sense of what the SSCMG would like to generally achieve. This seemed to quell some initial concerns over the \$620,000 listed cost of the three-step proposal.

“Recently, the health care district and St. Joseph (which operates Petaluma Valley Hospital) have participated in a physician recruitment committee that also has included Dr. Ostroff, but the SSCMG feels that it is more incumbent upon it to select and identify physicians,” said Doss, CEO of the health care district. “Our board members are cautious about the proposal, and need more information, though.”

Doss says that the lease the district signed with Santa Rosa Memorial/Alliance Hospital Services of Sonoma County in 1997, and which gave St. Joseph the authority to operate PVH, does not specify who is responsible for hiring doctors.

The SSCMG's proposal specifies that its members would work with

the PHCD board to select recruiters who would identify appropriate candidates. Then the SSCMG and its members would interview and select candidates, work with the chosen doctors to establish a structured primary-care group and integrate them into the community and newly established group.

“The health care district board is only interested in a collaborative hiring process that also involves us and St. Joseph,” Doss said. “But I believe the best tool we have in hiring physicians is to have the SSCMG work closely with them.”

Jim Suver, vice president of operations and chief administrator of Petaluma Valley Hospital, says that St. Joseph also has been working on a model for recruitment and retention of physicians, and that details will be forthcoming.

“Our hospital and St. Joseph are aware of the need for the community to rebuild its primary physician base,” he said. “We need to achieve a productive and amicable collaboration between St. Joseph, the PHCD board and the health care district.

“If this isn’t done properly, it could result in unsuccessful recruitment.”

Ostroff emphasizes that the physician community needs to be reorganized and restructured before the hiring process is revamped.

“We can’t begin recruiting until we have a structure in place,” he said, adding that the SSCMG could choose to offer either one model or both a model for doctors desiring a more individualized practice, and a model suited for those seeking a more integrated practice.

“The important thing is for physicians to be able to sustain themselves,” Ostroff said. “We want doctors to be successful when they get here, but they can’t compete unless we have a model that puts them in a comfort zone.

“We want doctors to know that if they do a good job, they’ll be successful.”

So, he feels that the first step will be to work with legal counsel to

reorganize the physician community, as well as to collaborate with the PHCD board to expand the base of insurance providers and eventually support a larger physician base. The proposal estimates the cost of this first step to be \$120,000, but Ostroff said that the cost is approximate and will be dependent on the details in the final proposal.

The proposal also lists a \$100,000 fee for the second step — hiring a recruiter and all associated expenses accrued while hiring two primary-care physicians — and a \$400,000 charge for the third step, which would cover guaranteed income, relocation and living support for the new doctors, as well as reorganizing physicians and establishing a new primary-care group.

Doss said he isn't sure how these expenses would be funded, but thinks that the PHCD will have a better idea after hearing more details about the plan.

Josephine Thornton, a member of the PHCD and PVH boards, expressed concern over the proposal.

“If someone can show us that there's a real need for these things, then I would consider putting money into the process, but it is risky for the physicians' group to take over the responsibility for physician recruitment, because it takes St. Joseph off the hook,” she said.

Ostroff and Fairchild stressed that the last two steps were included only to give the PHCD board members a general sense of what the SSCMG would like to achieve, and will be modified as the proposal is solidified.

Ostroff said the SSCMG would be taking on a big challenge if a proposal is approved.

“But we believe that we must take this multi-step approach as we move forward,” he said. “We might not be successful, but need to try, because we don't want to keep seeing physicians unable to sustain themselves, as has been happening in the past few years.”

As primary-care doctors set up practice in Petaluma, they typically

have struggled with many aspects, including unreliable income, unaffordable health plans and low reimbursement rates. The SSCMG has been trying to address these issues, and already has attained some successes, partially by gaining collective strength through its affiliation with the Marin Individual Practice Association.

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