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Hospice operator up for debate

As St. Joseph leaves Petaluma hospital, future of hospice uncertain

By MATT BROWN

Petaluma health officials are bracing for a confrontation over which organization will manage hospice services once St. Joseph Health ends its contract to operate Petaluma Valley Hospital.

Management of Petaluma hospice has emerged as one of several complicated issues as the Petaluma Health Care District tries to detangle from St. Joseph, which has operated the publicly-owned hospital for 20 years.

Hospice, which provides end of life services, was started locally by the health care district, according to Ramona Faith, CEO of the district.

When St. Joseph leased the hospital in 1997, it also took over operations of hospice services, which has a separate office on Payran Street.

The district engaged in discussions with St. Joseph to continue operating the hospital, but those talks broke down last year. The district began a new process and selected Paladin Healthcare as its preferred operator. St. Joseph has agreed to stay on until a deal with Paladin can be finalized.

But the relationship between St. Joseph and the district is deep and complex, further complicating a transfer to Paladin. Besides hospice, other lingering issues include the transfer of electronic medical records, and the fate of the Petaluma Valley Hospital Foundation, which raises money for medical equipment. The hospice issue was raised recently by Cathy Thomas, a member of the advisory board of Hospice Services of St. Joseph Health. In an email to supporters, she said that Petaluma Hospice was "being taken advantage of" by the health care district.

In an interview, she said that St. Joseph should continue to operate hospice. She said it is an important community service.

"It provides people with a good way to die," Thomas said. "It helps people meet their goals at the end of life. It supports not only the person that is dying but also their family and friends."

Faith said that the district was in discussions with St. Joseph about what is to become of hospice. She said that the district is committed to hospice services in Petaluma, whether they are provided by Paladin, St. Joseph or another provider.

"Hospice is a core service of Petaluma Valley Hospital," she said. "We can't simply give it to St. Joseph.

This is the community's hospice, and St. Joseph has been operating it. St. Joseph and the district need to determine how hospice transitions." While many hospice programs are profitable, Faith said that Petaluma's program was not a profit generator. Since taking over Petaluma's hospice program, St. Joseph has since replicated the model in starting hospice programs in Santa Rosa and Healdsburg.

St. Joseph maintains that they should continue to operate hospice after the health care provider leaves the hospital.

"We believe Hospice of Petaluma is one of these valuable community services, core to our mission and a part of the St. Joseph Health family," Vanessa deGier, St. Joseph regional director of communications, said in a written statement.

“Hospice of Petaluma was transferred to St. Joseph Health 20 years ago. Through the years it has been the people of Petaluma, including individual donors and volunteers, and St. Joseph Health who have invested in and supported Hospice of Petaluma, operating a nationally- recognized program that provides physical, emotional and spiritual care for patients and their families.

We plan to continue to provide hospice services to the people of Petaluma well into the future.”

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—Vanessa deGier, St. Joseph regional director of communications

CORRECTION

The Petaluma Health Care District currently does not have the authority to tax residents, and historically the district has not collected a tax. It would need to operate the hospital to tax residents. This information was incorrect in a story on page [A2](#) of the April [13](#) Argus-Courier.