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Business Insider

The Idaho Statesman

Boise, Idaho

Wednesday March 15, 2017

by Audrey Dutton

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Teens, kids a top priority for local hospitals in 2017

This is a big year for children in Treasure Valley health care.

It's a year of expansion, with local hospitals planning and launching new services for children and teens. Crews are building a new pediatrics pavilion across the street from St. Luke's Boise Medical Center.

And with the new pavilion comes more training for future children's doctors as more residents from the Family Medicine Residency of Idaho see teenage and child patients.

Hospital leaders also hope to tackle a growing mental health crisis among children and teens.

BUILD, BUILD, BUILD

Dozens of local leaders are making plans, trying new approaches and building new centers to improve pediatric health care.

Saint Alphonsus just opened a new pediatric specialty center in the Mulvaney Building on its Boise campus. The clinic is led by Dr. Adrian Curnow, a pediatric general surgeon. The hospital is recruiting another surgeon to join him. For mental health cases, Saint Al's plans to add a child psychologist and social workers at the clinic.

And St. Luke's quietly opened Idaho's first pediatric emergency department in December.

Housed in the Downtown Boise hospital, the St. Luke's pediatric ED is open 24/7, with its own emergency rooms and a staff of specially trained pediatric nurses. Workers who specialize in helping children get through scary situations — like getting stitches in an emergency room — are on hand from 5 to 10 p.m.

"We have already seen our volumes grow," says Kathryn Beattie, who leads St. Luke's Children's.

The \$31 million St. Luke's Children's Pavilion, at Jefferson Street and Avenue B, will open in late 2018 or early 2019, according to Tim Austin, the health system's construction manager. The pavilion will be a one-stop shop for children with a lot of medical needs.

"Today, if you have a child with a complex condition, you may need to see a nephrologist, a general surgeon, a urologist and a couple of therapists — physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech — and each visit might be in a different building," Beattie says. "We do have care coordinators to try to get them all in on the same day. But imagine now your child is wheelchair-bound, and you have to get them out to the car, into the wheelchair, into the building, back into the car, and do that three or four times in a day. It's pretty exhausting for both you and your child."

The new building will house offices for a large range of specialists. It also includes extras like "sibling care," so a patient's brothers and sisters don't have to sit through appointments and parents can focus on what the doctor is saying. It also will connect to the main hospital via a skybridge.

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“I think it’s going to make it a much healthier experience for those families,” she says.

REACHING TEENS AND KIDS IN CRISIS

One problem in particular is a priority for hospital leaders today: the minds of our next generation.

Their efforts come as a rising number of adolescents need to be hospitalized by the state, at increasing costs, in State Hospital South in Blackfoot.

St. Luke’s is opening a pediatric partial-hospitalization program this fall. “Partial hospitalization” is a middle ground for patients who are not a danger to themselves but still need substantial help. Patients can live at home but come in a few times a week or once a day for treatment, group therapy and other services.

“What we eventually will do is ... develop an evening intensive outpatient (program) where, then, when those kids are stabilized enough that they can go to school, they can go to school during the day, come to an intensive outpatient program in the afternoon for a couple hours of monitoring their medication changes, etc., and then move to standard outpatient care,” Beattie says.

“Because now we just have the two extremes — outpatient intervention with counseling and psychiatry visits, or we have inpatient,” she says. “There is this whole span in the middle. Starting in September, we’ll start addressing that gap.”

Across town, Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center is seeing more demand for its behavioral-health inpatient beds. President Odette Bolano is searching for solutions to helping Idaho’s youngest get help for depression and other disorders that start to emerge.

“I think telepsychiatry will gain traction, not only for adults but for the pediatric population,” she says.

The hospital does not offer telepsychiatry for children and adolescents, but it’s on Bola-no’s radar.

“Last year was the first year I think we started [a telepsychiatry pilot with adults], and we’ve seen some very positive feedback,” she says. “There’s no reason that couldn’t potentially be expanded to the pediatric [patients and] reach communities that don’t have those resources.”

In Caldwell, at West Valley Medical Center, hospital administrators are “developing plans to expand our behavioral health inpatient services to include the treatment of adolescents,” says spokeswoman Wendy McClain.

TRYING NEW THINGS

Other additions to the local children’s health care scene:

A St. Luke’s plans to expand telehealth services. The system in the next year or so will test the health system’s ability to do surgical follow-ups by telehealth. “Our goal is really to be able to help treat kids where they are,” Beattie says.

A St. Luke’s is working with local independent health-care providers on “quality initiatives,” such as immunization rates, depression screenings, asthma treatment and diabetes management.

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“We’re partnering with other groups in the region to make sure that children’s health isn’t focused just at St. Luke’s,” Beattie says. “Because we only get to take care of a small portion of them. And actually, the kids who come to St. Luke’s Children’s hospital are the sickest kids, and we have a lot of initiatives looking at keeping kids safe and healthy well beyond our walls.”

A West Valley Medical Center is starting construction in March on a neonatal intensive care unit in the Family Maternity Center that can care for babies born as early as 34 weeks. The NICU is slated to open this summer.

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