

# Physicians as Partners in Health System Governance

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**A**s healthcare organizations navigate complex change against a dynamic environment, physician leaders and board members are ever more important partners to implement change. Bayhealth utilizes various roles for physicians to be engaged in the system. The roles are well-defined and delineate board governance from operational governance. Both types of governance are intended to create a “shared voice” within the organization.

## Board Governance

In the early 1980s, our system established a bylaw requiring at least 25 percent of our parent corporation’s governing body be made up of members of the active medical staff. Currently, six of the 17 board members are physicians. The selection process is managed through the governance committee, and medical staff members are vetted with other community members to ensure their competency, alignment, and diversity meet the needs of the organization. As part of the cultivation of potential physician board members, there are purposeful discussions regarding the proper fiduciary responsibility and role of medical staff board members.

Physicians who serve on the board also serve on our executive, planning, performance improvement, and governance committees. Additionally, the performance improvement committee includes multiple non-director physicians who may have a strong interest in patient safety or system performance. All members have a voice and vote in final decisions or recommendations.

Our ACO is a regional collaboration with three other health systems. The ACO cares for roughly 45,000 attributed beneficiaries and takes both upside and downside risk. Our two seats on the board are filled by physicians who play a significant

role in strategy and governance; physicians also have a major part in operational leadership of the ACO. Our clinically integrated network is physician-led at the board level, and again, is also operationally driven by physicians.

Medical staff physicians also participate in Delaware’s health initiatives by serving as governing body members of the Delaware Healthcare Coalition, Delaware Health Information Network, American Hospital Association Regional Policy Board, Delaware Center for Health Innovation, and other bodies.

## Operational Governance

In addition to engaging physicians through the traditional medical staff departmental chair positions, Bayhealth operates its service lines, performance improvement and safety initiatives, and medical group with a dyad approach, teaming our physician leaders with service-line executives. Meetings, decisions, strategic activities, clinical, and operational decisions are all reached and led with this approach.

Physicians in medical directorships, and with various appointments, are typically engaged because of the critical nature of the work. For example, our surgical services executive committee manages OR block time, scheduling, staff resources, and other key OR issues. Three physicians lead that group and are complemented by nursing and administrative leadership, all focused on having a highly efficient and safe OR for patients and staff. Clinical capital purchasing for the system is now prioritized annually by a physician-led group and guided by the system’s strategic plan.

Physicians are also heavily engaged in areas of need such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which our epidemiologists, primary care physicians, intensivists and hospitalists, emergency and trauma physicians, among many others, came together on a regular basis and contributed to the successful operation of not just clinical areas, but also our Incident Command Center and Coronavirus Management Team. This team of physicians also collaborated with Delaware’s other health systems and hospitals to create a united front in managing the pandemic well.

## Key Board Takeaways

- Require that a certain percentage of board members are physicians.
- Provide physicians with operational governance opportunities, such as medical staff departmental chairmanships and dyad leadership approaches for service lines, performance improvement and safety initiatives, and medical groups.
- Support the engagement and development of medical staff members through a leadership development program.
- Commit to understanding and addressing physician well-being.

## Physician Engagement and Leadership Development

Bayhealth supports the engagement and development of its medical staff members through the sponsorship of a leadership development program. This weekend program is becoming more focused on smaller groups of developing leaders, with case-based learning and expectations for participation and growth.

As an organization, we have also committed to understanding and addressing physician well-being. Our chief wellness officer, a role we have had in place since 2019, has led the initial work by identifying impediments to a comfortable and efficient work environment, and by establishing professional coaching and counseling resources for physicians who need support and assistance.

This team has also now established quarterly medical staff open forums to share the “state of the organization” and promote open conversations between the CEO and other administrative leaders with our physicians.

Overall, Bayhealth’s efforts are predicated on the belief that strengthening the health of our community requires dedicated clinicians in partnership with other leaders and staff to identify and meet the population’s current and future needs for preventive, acute, and chronic care.

*The Governance Institute thanks Terry M. Murphy, FACHE, President and CEO, and Gary Siegelman, M.D., M.Sc., Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, Bayhealth, for contributing this article. They can be reached at [terry\\_murphy@bayhealth.org](mailto:terry_murphy@bayhealth.org) and [gary\\_siegelman@bayhealth.org](mailto:gary_siegelman@bayhealth.org).*

## About Bayhealth

Bayhealth is a 400-bed, two-hospital system located in central and southern Delaware. The organization has a medical staff of 500 practicing physicians, over 50 ambulatory sites, and employs 4,200 staff members. Bayhealth participates in a regional ACO, a clinically integrated network, and the Bayhealth Medical Group employs over 100 physicians both in primary and specialty care. Major service lines are in oncology, cardiovascular, orthopaedics and rehabilitation, women’s and children’s services, and neurosciences.