

A Community-Focused Shift to Strategic Planning

By David A. Tam, M.D., FACHE, Beebe Healthcare

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught healthcare executives and boards many lessons including that healthcare is truly local.

Organizations large and small, such as Beebe Healthcare in Sussex County, Delaware, are now assessing how things went, where they are now, and what they plan to be in the short- and long-term. This assessment gives leadership the opportunity to shift their strategic focus to local community services and health rather than developing economies of scale for operational and financial improvement through consolidations and regionalization.



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Through partnerships and other forms of growth in size, health systems have also been able to attain financial stability and gravitas in negotiating with third-party payers for favorable reimbursement rates.

And, although these efforts have resulted in improved performance, the role of the local community-focused board and management have been diluted, resulting in a greater disconnect between health systems and the health of the communities they serve.

Planning With Agility and Autonomy

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught leaders that strategic agility and relevance to the community's needs is critical for community-focused health systems' short- and long-term planning. How healthcare organizations responded to the pandemic in 2020 depended on what the community needed. Although those needs varied from community to community across the United States, they often included local COVID-19 testing, care for patients near their families, communication and updates to clarify what national leaders were saying, and reassurance to the community that vaccinations would be available in an equitable and culturally sensitive manner. As a local non-profit, independent

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For many years, the healthcare field, focused on operational excellence in areas of quality, safety, and finance, has looked to make improvements through the adoption of externally driven metrics and programs. Regionalization and consolidation have helped to standardize care processes, streamlining both quality and financial improvements.



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Key Board Takeaways

To shift strategic planning to be more community-focused, healthcare boards and leaders should do the following:

- Plan with agility and have the autonomy to evolve with community needs.
- Try to reengage with the community every few years to stay abreast of its growth and changes.
- Develop community partnerships to ensure diverse opinions are being implemented into the organization's strategic planning.
- Cultivate a culture of collaboration to succeed in the post-pandemic era.

and community-focused health system, Beebe Healthcare was able to rapidly address the needs and concerns of its community quickly and effectively.

For Beebe, COVID-19 revealed the strategic importance of local, community-focused care through the recognized need to provide testing and vaccine administration to workers in the poultry industry. This is a diverse workforce, both from a socioeconomic and a cultural perspective.

A deeper understanding and engagement with the wider community was absolutely necessary to provide culturally sensitive care—not just through translation services but also in collaborating with community groups and leaders in addressing concerns regarding social and medical services related to testing and vaccination. Moving forward, Beebe Healthcare's strategic planning will need to address how we provide services for this population and other underserved members of our community to ensure that we are working to improve the health of the entire community, whether we are battling COVID-19, the opioid epidemic and mental illness, or diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

For many health systems, the post-COVID-19 era makes community-focused strategic planning more important. People will be more aware of how their nearby health facility demonstrates relevance to their needs,



and the resilience to provide care despite external influences. Questions like “will my hospital have the staff or supplies to care for me during the next health crisis?” or “will my doctor’s office stay open?” will remain, and boards and senior leaders must work together to address those local community concerns.

Although mergers and acquisitions will still occur as the healthcare field continues to strive for operational excellence, greater emphasis on community-focused strategic planning must play a larger role for local boards and senior leaders, who often lose autonomy under the infrastructure of large systems.

Developing Community Partnerships

One of the most important things that systems across the country learned from the COVID-19 pandemic was the need for close and meaningful relationships with local elected officials and community leaders. Like politics, healthcare is local, and having such relationships is critical if health systems turn their attention to community-focused planning. As larger systems grow in scale, the important relevance of relationships with local leaders is often lost. Board members and senior leaders must work to retain and nurture the relationships made with community leaders during the COVID-19 battle to ensure that the needs of the communities they serve are understood and well-served.

To develop strategic plans that are relevant to the communities served,

boards and executive teams must reflect the diversity of the local population. This again requires a close and intimate relationship between health system leadership and the community. In a time when there is such great emphasis on populations of diversity and concerns about healthcare being delivered in an equitable manner, development and execution of strategic plans must incorporate the “ground level” input of the local community.

Beebe Healthcare continues to work with First State Community Action Agency, a powerful voice with the African American community in Sussex County, the Nanticoke Indian Tribe, and many others to adapt vaccination efforts to remove barriers such as transportation and lack of trust. These kinds of partnerships allow healthcare systems to better serve the needs of the community where they are instead of where the hospital is located. As we look to the post-COVID era, Beebe has the opportunity to continue integrating the voice of the community in development and execution of our strategic plans.

Cultivating Collaboration and Community Engagement

All of this requires governance and leadership working closely together to develop a new model of agile strategic planning in the post-pandemic era to determine what is needed to truly become a community-focused health system.

This culture of collaboration must exist to trust these new perspectives. Established CEOs shouldn’t assume to know what’s going on if they are always talking to the same people. Rather, they should make a concerted effort to reengage with the community, especially those whose voices most need to be heard, to gain a better understanding of what is happening in their backyard.

On the other end of the spectrum, being a new leader in a new region when the pandemic hit came with its own challenges and lessons.

Most importantly, it showed that making sure only a certain segment of the population is tested or vaccinated for COVID-19 does not equate to the goal of ending the pandemic by developing a herd immunity. And treating one subset of the population for opioid addiction, mental illness, and other major health challenges will not help healthcare organizations do what we are really here to do—take care of the people in our community who rely on us for their healthcare.

The effects from the pandemic and how it will shape healthcare’s strategic planning in the future will determine its success well after the health crisis ends.

The Governance Institute thanks David A. Tam, M.D., FACHE, President and CEO, Beebe Healthcare, for contributing this article. He can be reached at dtam@beebehealthcare.org.