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Pediatricians take case for children's hospital to the community

By Tammie Smith



Jamie Jackson's 3½-year-old son has a rare genetic disorder, tetrasomy 18p. So to keep track of his many medical appointments, she carries around a three-ring binder.

"We have to carry the information and documentation with us to make sure they know what they are dealing with," Jackson said.

"The care here in Richmond is good care. It's just so fragmented across the city," she said. "We have about 20 people on board on Carter's (medical) team."

If the region had a comprehensive children's hospital, all those doctors might be in one place, taking a team approach to manage her son's illness, she said.

Jackson and other parents are rallying around efforts by community pediatricians to develop a free-standing, full-service children's hospital.

Pediatricians Associated to Care for Kids, abbreviated PACKids, formed in 2011 with the goal of making a comprehensive children's hospital for the Richmond area a reality. Previous attempts to get a children's

hospital were led by hospital systems. None came to fruition.

PACKids recently launched an educational campaign to take its case to the people, said Dr. Melissa Nelson, one of the leaders of PACKids, which she estimates has about 200 pediatricians actively involved.

"We're very confident that the leaders of our local government, of the health systems, the academic center, know that bringing all of pediatric services under one roof will be a great thing for kids," Nelson said.

"We hope to really bring the discussion into our patient conversations, into our offices. We hope to reach out to PTAs, religious organizations, any organizations. We want everyone to know we are talking about an academic research center that would serve all of central Virginia."

Parents such as Jackson and Jennifer Palazzo don't need to be convinced. Palazzo's son, now 13, started developing mysterious symptoms when he was 10, she said. The family was living elsewhere at the time.

"We had started to get a little bit of a direction when we got transferred to Virginia," Palazzo said.

Here, "you end up having to do a lot of independent research to put the pieces of the puzzle together," Palazzo said. "Luckily he is about 99 percent better. But he does receive treatment monthly at VCU. But because they are not a children's hospital, he is exposed to things that in a perfect world I wish he was not exposed to," she said. On some appointments, she said, they've seen shackled prisoners with armed guards.

"I hate to keep using that specific example, but it is a reality." Palazzo said. "Even in our July visit, once again we had two armed guards and prisoners. The problem is because we don't have a true children's hospital, certain treatments can only be provided in different parts of the hospital that are not pediatrics only."

The most recent effort to build a children's hospital was in 2005, when VCU Health System and Children's Hospital of Richmond, a small specialty care hospital that has since become part of VCU, announced plans to build a full-service children's hospital on the MCV campus. In 2007, those plans were nixed, blamed on rising construction cost projections.

VCU, according to data from Virginia Health Information, has the bulk of the region's inpatient pediatric cases. About 40 percent of the region's child inpatients were cared for at VCU in 2011. Chippenham Hospital and St. Mary's Hospital followed, with 25 percent and 17 percent, respectively.

VCU Health System officials have expressed concern that a free-standing children's hospital would dilute resources and harm their missions, which include not just providing clinical care but also training future doctors and researching new treatments.

While initially there seemed to be a "with or without you" sentiment, the "you" in this case referring to the VCU Health System, the rhetoric has shifted to inclusion.

"For this to work, we need VCU to be a part of it," Nelson said.

"At the same time, we need the community to be involved in it, too. So we're looking for a partnership, and we're asking VCU and the community to work together," Nelson said, explaining that a feasibility study said the region only can support one children's hospital. Children, for the most part, are healthy and don't use medical services as much as adults.

"We can't build the kind of facility we talk about unless the two work together. ... PACKids believes it's time to come up with solutions instead of coming up with excuses," Nelson said.

Dr. Bruce K. Rubin, chairman of the department of pediatrics at VCU, said VCU is intimately involved in

PACKids.

"We have members on the board. We have people involved in all of their subcommittees," Rubin said.

"I am delighted with what PACKids is doing. PACKids and their work with the philanthropic community and others is a real opportunity. ... We are among PACKids' biggest fans. They are really doing wonderful things to raise awareness and perhaps help us build a children's hospital for the region that everybody wants."

Among the many unresolved issues is where such a facility would be located. Locations in the West End and on Brook Road have been mentioned.

"We want a location accessible to our families and strollers and wheelchairs and that is a safe place for families to go even in the middle of the night," Nelson said. "We have to build a facility for the future. ... The Children's Hospital Foundation is in the process of conducting a site study. I think that's a really positive step."

"I'm more optimistic about this project now than I was six months ago," Nelson said.

Children's hospitals in Virginia

Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters

Location: 601 Children's Lane, Norfolk

Type: Not-for-profit

Financials: Revenue and gains in excess of expenses and losses: \$40,837,731; 14 percent margin (from July 2009 to June 2010)

Beds: 198

Admissions: 5,835

Staff: 1,959.1 full-time equivalents

Medicaid participation: 48 percent (as a percentage of total patient days)

Medical school affiliation: Eastern Virginia Medical School

Top service lines (based on percent of hospital total cases): pulmonary (lung) 18.5 percent; general medicine, 9.24 percent; neonatology, 8.92 percent; gastroenterology, 7.91 percent; general surgery, 7.29 percent; hematology, 6 percent; endocrinology, 4.94 percent; orthopedic surgery, 4.14 percent; oncology, 3.91 percent.

Source: Virginia Health Information 2011 Industry Report

University of Virginia

- U.Va. Children's Hospital is part of University Hospital in Charlottesville but is treated as a "hospital within a hospital."
- About 100 beds in the U.Va. Children's Hospital are spread across several units.

- The Battle Building, at West Main Street and Jefferson Park Avenue and connected to the U.Va. Medical Center, will consolidate outpatient care for children in one location. The 200,000-square-foot building is scheduled for completion in 2014.

Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU

Location: Brook Road campus

Affiliation: Part of the VCU Health System

Services: Specialized medical and therapeutic services, including a children's feeding program, motion analysis, physical medicine and rehabilitation, speech therapy and more

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