

Hiawatha Hospital to close home health agency

(KNZA)--The Hiawatha Community Hospital has announced it will be closing its Home Health Agency no later than April 30th of this year.

Hospital CEO Jeff Shelton said in a news release that the decision is directly related to the regulatory and financial barriers set by Medicare which limits the hospital's ability to financially sustain a hospital based home health program.

He added the decision was very difficult and came only after the hospital Board of Trustees, medical staff and leadership team carefully reviewed the historic financial performance of the service and the reimbursement barriers created by being a Critical Access Hospital with a hospital based home health agency.

Shelton said letters were sent out Saturday to their current home health patients notifying them of the pending closure, and the hospital will be assisting them in identifying agencies that may be available to continue providing home health services.

He also added that all efforts will be made to transition current home health personnel to vacant positions currently open within the hospital.

Northeast Kansas Multi-County Health CEO Kristin Watkins met with the Brown County Commission Monday to discuss the pending closure. Also on hand were representatives of the Hiawatha Community Hospital.

Watkins says as the only remaining home health provider in the county, currently at capacity, there is a very likely potential for upwards of 17 patients in need of home health services to remain unseen on a daily basis .

She said her agency cannot, at its current staffing, meet all the county's home health needs and don't have the resources to hire additional staff to fill the service void left by the closure of the hospital's home health agency. Watkins added the only thing they can do is ask for county financial assistance to hire more staff.

Watkins said it would probably take three additional full-time staff members to accommodate the impending home health need, which would cost an estimated \$200,000 annually.

Commissioner Keith Olsen said he would like to see the three counties that are part of Northeast Kansas Multi-County Health -- Atchison, Brown and Jackson--work together to come up with a solution.

Commissioners asked Watkins to visit with the other counties involved and report back to the Commission.

Editors note: the following statement was released by NEK Multi-County Health CEO Kristen Watkins,

All over the state of Kansas, non-profit Home Health organizations are closing their doors due to funding cuts and increased regulations. NEK Home Health and Hospice, like many others, operates our Home Health department at a loss that has, for twenty years, only been sustainable through our hospice revenues. We remain committed to providing services but we are currently operating near patient capacity and do not have the resources to hire additional staff to fill the service void left in the wake of Hiawatha Hospital's closure of their Home Health program. We have provided quality care to our three county region since 1972 and will continue to do so but must reiterate that we do not have the resources to take on patients that have lost care due to the recent changes at Hiawatha Hospital nor do we have the resources to hire any additional staff. We are committed to working with our local partners in healthcare to be part of the solution to this community health crisis.

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