

Opinion Editorial – 500 words

Expanding KanCare is the Right Thing to Do for Rural Hospitals

By Dave Martin

As the new year begins, Kansas lawmakers have an opportunity to strengthen rural communities across the state and help preserve a way of life many Kansans choose and cherish. As City Manager of Fort Scott, I know what it takes to keep a rural community vibrant and growing.

Health care is often the deal-breaker for a rural community. Independence, Kansas, lost its hospital last year, and businesses there are disheartened. They know that health care and education are key quality-of-life issues for rural communities. Health care is critical to maintain businesses, industries and retirees, and to grow and attract new businesses and young families. While Mercy Hospital Fort Scott has decided to remain open, I know this facility – like hospitals in other rural Kansas communities – struggles to remain financially viable.

Expanding KanCare, the state's Medicaid program, would provide some relief for Mercy Hospital Fort Scott and give all hospitals an infusion of cash while reducing the state's uninsured population and improving their health. Using Kansans' tax dollars to help pay for care in a more cost efficient way makes good economic sense. I encourage policymakers to look at the facts, and consider the impact to Kansas' rural hospitals and communities.

During a 17-month discernment process led by Mercy Hospital Fort Scott, city and business leaders as well as citizens gained a better understanding of the importance of the hospital to the community. We've learned a valuable lesson – it has to be a team effort. The City has to work with the hospital, citizens and businesses to keep our hospital financially viable.

KanCare expansion is an important factor in the survival of rural communities – it's an economic issue. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment estimates that KanCare expansion would bring more than \$2.5 million annually to Mercy Hospital Fort Scott. Instead of using that money to help rural health care providers, the Kansas Legislature has refused to accept nearly \$1 billion in federal funds for Medicaid expansion over the past three years.

Health services employ approximately 1,300 people in Bourbon County, which is about 13.7 percent of all job holders. Mercy is the second largest employer in Fort Scott; losing even some of those jobs would be devastating. Mercy's economic impact ripples throughout the community, creating additional jobs and income in the goods and services sector, and generating sales tax revenue.

Our City values Mercy Fort Scott for many reasons, and we want the hospital not only to survive but thrive. Beyond the hospital's tangible contributions is the peace of mind that comes from knowing help is close-by when serious injuries or illnesses occur. As 2016 begins, I hope lawmakers will make the wise decision to expand KanCare. Supporting a unique, new solution for Kansas is the right thing to do, especially for rural hospitals and the communities they serve.

Dave Martin is City Manager for Fort Scott, Kansas. The city of about 8,000 people is the county seat of Bourbon County, and is about 88 miles south of Kansas City.