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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice story as always, Joyce. Thank you.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 House calls for health

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 With the Mobile Integrated Health program, EMTs
3 provide home-health case services

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4 TEXT BODY:

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5 An ounce of prevention can sometimes truly lead to a
6 pound of cure.

7 One example of this maxim in action is the Mobile
8 Integrated Health (MIH) program — run by Brattleboro Memorial
9 Hospital and Rescue Inc. — which just won the 2026 American
10 Hospital Association Rural Hospital Excellence in Innovation
11 Award.

12 Traditionally, emergency medical technicians (EMTs)
13 respond to medical emergencies in a time of crisis. With MIH,
14 EMTs come to a patients' homes and prevent the crisis before it
15 can escalate.

16 "The MIH program shifts the focus away from just
17 providing care to patients for emergencies and more towards
18 helping keep patients healthy and well," said Rescue Inc. Chief of
19 Operations Drew Hazelton.

20 He said the program works with patients who have had
21 total joint replacements, or have a diagnosis of congestive heart
22 failure or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a term
23 used to describe chronic lung diseases, including emphysema
24 and chronic bronchitis.

25 Using patient-specific care protocols, we're able to
26 provide in-home care and options when their disease process
27 needs acute management," he said.

28 "It's pretty exciting," Hazelton added. "Our outcomes are
29 amazing."

30 He described the MIH program, the only active one of its
31 kind in the state, as "revolutionary" for Vermont.

32 "The state is trying to model our program into other areas
33 of the state," Hazelton said, noting that the state is planning to
34 use some of the recently announced federal funding from the
35 Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' Rural Health
36 Transformation Program to fund such initiatives.

37 The irony here is that when fewer people are
38 hospitalized for emergencies, it lowers medical costs. It also
39 means BMH's Emergency Department loses money.

40 This is not a minor issue for a struggling rural hospital
41 like BMH, which has seen a chief executive abruptly take leave
42 and quit, a chief financial officer that also left the role, an influx
43 of hospital financial experts, a budget deficit of \$14.5 million that
44 will take between two and three years to eradicate, and an
45 ongoing top-to-bottom examination of costs and services that

46 includes mediation with two unions. And, potentially, a nurses
47 strike.

48 But the goal here is not economic. It is about doing the
49 right thing in an old-fashioned way: preventing minor medical
50 issues from becoming major ones by bringing medical care into
51 the home.

52 And while the new state initiatives might be funded by
53 new federal funds, the program that inspired them is on its own.

54 “When we first started this program, we had a grant,”
55 said Dr. Tony Blofson, acting co-CEO of BMH, at a recent press
56 conference. “Our grant money has run out, and we are now
57 funding this.”

58 Blofson called the situation “a double-edged sword.”

59 “We’re paying for the program,” he said. “We have
60 decreased visits to the emergency room and we have decreased
61 readmissions. Guess what? That’s less income for the hospital.”

62 As a result, “not only are we paying for something, but
63 we’re losing money because we’re not getting the admissions and
64 we’re not getting the visits to the emergency department,” Blofson
65 said. “Even with that, it’s still the right thing to do for our
66 community.”

67 **Expanding on a good idea**

68 MIH began three years ago. Its first patients were
69 orthopedics patients needing total joint replacements. At the
70 same press conference, Dr. Elizabeth McLarney, an orthopedist
71 — and BMH’s other interim co-CEO — called the MIH program
72 “my baby.”

73 “The idea came out of a discussion of, How do we
74 provide care for our patients out in the community without them
75 having to come to us?” McLarney said. “And we started with
76 orthopedics, obviously my department, because it was a very
77 contained patient population.”

78 For patients needing a total joint replacement, Rescue
79 Inc. would go into their homes ahead of time, assess them, and
80 get them set up for the surgery.

81 Then, after the procedure, after a patient would come
82 home, Rescue Inc. would meet them at their house, make sure
83 they were settled once again, review their medications with
84 them, make sure they were taking them appropriately, and make
85 sure everything else was settled.

86 EMTs also offered a phone number for Rescue Inc. that
87 patients could use if they had issues or concerns.

88 "Patients could reach out to us," McLarney said. "They
89 could send us pictures."

90 She said that at the hospital, "we saved on readmissions,
91 on revisits to the hospital, and we gave a lot of patients and their
92 families peace of mind. So that was very successful, and then we
93 transitioned into doing COPD and congestive heart failure."

94 Today, MIH serves 421 patients in Windham County,
95 including in Brattleboro, Putney, Bellows Falls, Wardsboro, and
96 Jamaica. It has visited 1,855 homes, according to BMH Director
97 of Special Programs Chris Finnell, who runs MIH.

98 "We've worked with patients from all different walks of
99 life in terms of their means," Finnell said. "We have some patients
100 who have a lot of support, and we have some patients who don't
101 have any support."

102 One example is a patient the program sees every other
103 week.

104 "Unfortunately, he lost his spouse a few years ago, and
105 he is kind of struggling to manage his medications," Finnell said.
106 "That has resulted in several hospitalizations. He would just
107 forget to take his medications."

108 At MIH, "we've been able to work with him, and he has
109 not had to be back in the hospital since we started almost a year
110 ago. That's a real good patient success story."

111 Seeing patients in the context of their day-to-day
112 environment also lets the EMTs intervene appropriately sooner.

113 Sometimes, EMTs have found mold issues in patients'
114 homes and been able to help get them mold remediation
115 services, Finnell said. "And that might have been a contributing
116 factor to the decline in their health."

117 "We've many, many times found patients who have
118 medications that are no longer prescribed to them. Just masses
119 and masses of medications. And they've inadvertently ended up
120 in the hospital because they've taken medications that they
121 weren't supposed to be taking," he continued.

122 "We help them get everything cleaned up so they can be
123 successful in managing their medications," Finnell said. "Then
124 we help them dispose of the medications that are no longer
125 utilized or prescribed."

126 The MIH technicians are cross-trained to provide in-
127 home health care as well as emergency medicine, Hazelton said.

128 "We have established a specialty training and
129 credentialing program through our EMS Academy up in Newfane
130 in conjunction with BMH to provide clinical rotations and
131 medical oversight," he said.

132 That team provides MIH services 24 hours a day, seven
133 days a week.

134 "We also do scheduled appointments six days a week for
135 patients and follow-ups six days a week," he added. "Then those
136 same providers do provide one-on-one emergency coverage
137 when they're not doing MIH."

138 Home care is almost as good for the EMTs as it is for the
139 patients, Finnell said.

140 "It's been a very good thing for our staff, because they're
141 able to provide help to people," Finnell said. "It's not just getting
142 called for 911 and only having the ability to do a few things and
143 transport the patient to the [emergency department]. The whole
144 goal of this is preventative health."

Overcoming obstacles

To start the program, dispensation had to come from the state to allow Rescue to enter patients' homes, to allow them to evaluate patients, and to not force them to transport patients to the hospital immediately.

The state not only granted that dispensation, it is now looking to see how it can expand the program statewide. The way the MIH program changes emergency medicine is especially meaningful to Hazelton.

"I've been working my entire career at changing the way that we deliver EMS," Hazelton said. "That's been one of my my goals for a long time — trying to make sure that we provide our patients with appropriate options."

He added that he has "testified many times in Montpelier about the challenges in EMS and the challenges in health emergency response in general, where our system is not well designed."

To illustrate, suppose somebody calls 911, he said. The 911 dispatcher has three options: They can send an ambulance, they can send a fire truck, or they can send a police cruiser.

"Those are really the only options, even though sometimes those may not be the most appropriate answers," Hazelton said. "And when an ambulance crew arrives, they're only given two options: They can take you to the hospital emergency department, or they can leave you at home."

The system, he said, has "evolved to this point where the number of options for people when they're having some of these life-changing events is very limited."

The MIH program provides Rescue with more options to provide emergency help.

"So when we first met with BMH leadership, we were very excited about the possibility of improving health outcomes and partnering," Hazelton said. "I don't personally go out and provide MIH services, but I do get the pleasure of receiving

179 phone calls from patients, almost on a weekly basis, and family
180 members will tell me how meaningful it is to them and how
181 much changed their life to not spend days at a time in the
182 hospital.”

183 The MIH program is also meaningful to McLarney
184 because the hospital’s mission is to keep the community healthy.

185 “Our mission is to provide quality health care to the
186 entire community,” he said, acknowledging the “variety of
187 reasons” — perhaps mental health or physical in nature — that
188 keep them away.

189 “The more we can keep people out of the hospital, the
190 healthier our community is going to be,” McLarney said. “We
191 need to reach out to them and meet them where they are.”

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