



WATERSHED EVENT

Resilience Reigns at Columbus Regional Hospital

By Rebecca Patrick

“We heard a noise in the floor beneath us. Our chief nurse officer ran out and looked down the stairwell. We were about one foot away from the water being on the ground floor. The power had already been lost. That’s when the decision to evacuate our patients was made,” recalls Jim Bickel, chief executive officer of Columbus Regional Hospital (CRH).

“Afterwards, I can remember just standing on the bridge and looking at the darkened facility. You never see a hospital with its lights off. That’s when it hit me – the magnitude of the work we had in front of us.”

The “once in 500 years flood” hit on June 7, 2008. As water spilled over the banks of nearby Haw Creek, the hospital felt the effects first in the north parking lot. Visitors and employees were quickly told to move their vehicles. Nothing like this had ever happened in the hospital’s more than 90-year history. But, that was only the beginning.

The below-grade loading dock acted as a funnel, guiding the racing waters into the facility itself.

“Within 45 minutes, the entire basement was filled to the ceiling with water. . . . The force of the water was just tremendous. It actually ripped doors and metal doorframes right out of the concrete.

“We were very fortunate to get all of our staff working down there that evening out safely,” Bickel stresses. “They described it very much like the movie *Titanic*, with water rushing down the hallways.”

The basement was virtually an entire loss and with it a significant part of the infrastructure and support that makes a hospital operational, including the: electrical power; laboratory and pharmacy; heating, cooling and ventilation; sterilization center for surgical instruments; phone and IT systems; and kitchen.

The water’s next target was the first floor. “It came up through duct work and any hole it

An unusual sign covering reflected the status of the Bartholomew County hospital (photo courtesy of Columbus Regional Hospital).



The hospital's south entrance, lobby and parking lot during the flood period and today (top photos courtesy of Columbus Regional Hospital).



could find. We ended up with six to eight inches of water across every area of the ground level of the hospital," Bickel recounts.

Patient evacuation began at roughly 6 p.m., a mere two hours after water encroached the north parking lot. By 9:30 p.m., all 157 patients were safely on their way to other area hospitals.

The Bartholomew County facility would remain closed for nearly five months. The physical damage and business interruption expenses would total more than \$200 million.

That night, as Bickel – an 18-year CRH veteran who had assumed the CEO post less than a year earlier – stood on the bridge overlooking the complex, he was left to contemplate how to put the hospital back together and what to do with the staff of approximately 1,800.

Employees first

Within the first week, Bickel and members of the executive team made a telling and pivotal decision: to keep all staff on the payroll and with benefits while going through the recovery.

Cash reserves of nearly \$50 million that were designated

for an expansion slated to start in the fall of 2008 were now going to pay for employee salaries.

The decision was announced at one of the CRH update sessions held at a local high school auditorium. The employees gave Bickel a standing ovation.

"You could tell it was a huge relief. You could just feel the tension melt in the room," Bickel states. "I still have employees come up to me and say they couldn't believe what they were hearing. Many of them, I think, thought they had to go out and look for another job."

For Larry Meade, marketing and advertising manager, it was "definitely appreciated and a sense of relief, but it honestly wasn't a surprise. I've only been here three years, but I've never worked anywhere that has such a commitment to employees as there is here.

"I think it's a reflection of the culture and values, and how leadership really believes in the employees and understands the important role they play."

Chris Raaf, vice president of professional support services,

"There were no lights except for temporary ones in the parking lot. It was kind of a spooky feeling after the initial excitement was over. I walked into the emergency room and there was the sound of the monitors running down. They were running on battery power and you would hear a lonely beep down one hall, then you would hear another tone down that hall. You could hear the dripping of water. It was very eerie. I'm an emergency room physician, and we don't get creeped out by too much, but I was like, 'Wow!'
– Dr. Tom Sonderman, chief medical officer

who only joined the staff five weeks prior to the flood, offers another perspective.

"It gave me a sense that no matter what happened, we had our staff. And that's really who makes us who we are every day. ... It gave me the sense that as we came back, we would have what we needed to accomplish our goals. It's not been easy, but without the staff it would have been tremendously difficult."

Needless to say, the gesture helped retain the staff – almost all of which came back to work when the hospital reopened on October 27.

Bickel says he gets asked a lot if this was a hard decision. The simple answer is no. "We had been pursuing being a best place to work, a great place to work and have been deliberate about having that reputation. We said, 'Well, what would a best place to work do?' It's invest in our people before you invest in brick and mortar."

Pulling together

Initially, Bickel wondered if the staff was just going to be "on vacation" while the hospital was down. Quickly, though, the executive team realized the need to get employees back to contributing meaningful work.

Those involved in delivering outpatient services – such as oncology – did their jobs at other locations in the region. Other medical staff helped with their former patients at area hospitals and facilities.

It was also a period for doing things that invariably get pushed farther down the work list than they should.

"We had to look at this as an opportunity and not as a crisis. How can we emerge out of this stronger and better than where we were before the flood? We literally launched or continued dozens of process improvement projects, with the intent of putting them in place when we reopened," Bickel states. "It's normally so hard to find the time to work on these. Guess what? We had the time."

And, of course, there were massive clean-up efforts in need of workers, both at the hospital and throughout Columbus.

At CRH, the center of activity was the parking lots, where nurses, housekeepers, x-ray technicians and more worked side by side doing an array of unglamorous assignments.

"No one ever said, 'No, that's not my job' or 'I don't do that kind of work,'" reports Joe Turco, director of human resources. "Here, teamwork is critical and expected, and we just pull together."



After the flood, the hospital's basement "was like walking through French onion soup. You could only get so far because there was so much debris," says CEO Jim Bickel, shown in front of the administration's mobile offices.

One of the tasks was cleaning over one million mud-covered slides from the pathology lab. "We thought it was important to save those slides (which were sealed) for our patients. If they had another biopsy, there would be something to compare them to," Raaf states. "People cleaned those for days and weeks on end."

Though the situation was surreal, chief financial officer Marlene Weatherwax calls it "probably the most fun I've had working together with this entire team of people. We were able to maintain a very good focus. We were able to make decisions quickly. We were so focused on getting the hospital open. People were very energized."

The entire experience also allowed employees – many of whom had little or no prior contact – to get to know each other.

"Sometimes as you work, you find yourself in silos. Working virtually with no walls all summer, it helped to bring some of those silos down. It gave people a better understanding because people would talk about their jobs – what they did –

before the flood and to see how various jobs impacted each other," Raaf surmises.

Bickel says the culture of teamwork "was there prior to the flood, but it really revealed itself in ways that were unbelievable during the flood recovery efforts."

He points to the dietary workers who worked out of a tent amid the summer heat to serve meals to employees every day.

"Their attitude really stood out; they were always positive and upbeat and were a real source of keeping spirits up. Everybody did amazing work, but when I think back, that tent became a common gathering place."

Adds Raaf, "We showed that we could be CRH without a hospital this last summer. We did that in the parking lots. We did that with MED-1 (a mobile emergency unit set up to take care of residents). We did it every step of the way."

Bickel says the credit goes to the committed and engaged workforce for accomplishing what seemed like the impossible. "We had about 12 to 18 months of work ahead of us to get this facility open, but we did it in under five months."

"Every employee has the opportunity, in a variety of ways, to voice opinions, to share ideas, to really feel you're part of where the organization is going. I've worked places where they may think they wanted to foster feedback, but they really don't want to know. Here, they really do want to know your thoughts."

– Larry Meade, marketing and advertising manager

Community spirit

While certainly devastated by the flood itself, CRH also saw a local community in need. Nearly 2,000 homes were impacted and some people lost everything.

"When it comes time to make tough decisions, you go back to who you are as an organization. We made a lot of our decisions during this time based on our values. One of those values is being a good citizen," Bickel offers.

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“So we decided to give some of our employees back to the community to help with flood recovery and flood relief.

“We had 15 to 20 case managers working throughout the summer and fall. We had employees working hot meal sites. Our employees also sifted through donated clothing and household goods to get those items ready for distribution. Some employees were out working in people’s homes stripping out drywall and insulation, and cleaning out debris, the muck and the mud,” he explains.

On weekends, CRH employees could be found directing parking at the county fair or at baseball and softball tournaments.

The community was not only grateful for the efforts at various locations but for keeping employees on the payroll, says Bickel.

“In hindsight, with the economic downturn (that followed), had we had to lay off a good portion of our workforce it would have been devastating. It was not only the right thing to do for our employees, but it was a tremendous benefit to the community.”

Bickel is quick to note that it was a two-way street, with the hospital also enjoying “tremendous community support.”

One memorable display of that backing came when CRH reopened its doors. Students at St. Bartholomew, a local catholic school, made 1,800 paper corsages for the employees to welcome them back.

“It was just amazing ... our employees were really touched,” he shares.

Lasting impressions

Columbus Regional returned to its normal volume of patients and activities only two weeks after reopening. Restoring some parts of the building to their prior glory will take more time.

The administrative offices are temporary; the pre-flood digs given up for operations that used to be housed in the basement. Tapping on the plastic table in the new board room, Bickel jokes, “You can see we’ve spared no expense here.”

Basement repairs are scheduled to finish at some point in 2010.

All of the ground floor, sans the cafeteria, was scheduled to be up and functioning in April. The watermarks on the stone pillars, which Bickel points to like a badge of honor, will remain.

“We had a very strong culture going into this, and I feel like the culture has just been strengthened. Times of crisis can be really bonding, and that’s what happened here,” Bickel believes.

“We’ve had this focus on excellence – providing the best service, the best care. That vision really resonates with employees. It’s also what sustained us and got us through this. We’re going to set the bar on how you can recover from such a disaster. With the right culture, infrastructure and committed workforce, you can get just about anything accomplished.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Columbus Regional Hospital at (812) 379-4441 or www.crh.org



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Upcoming Schedule

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| June 4: Fort Wayne | Aug 26: Elkart (date tentative) |
| July 8: Noblesville | Sept 3: Indianapolis |
| July 22: Valparaiso | |

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