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Nurses march along with members of the CSEA near the Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla. Registered nurses at the center are in the process of starting negotiations for their next contract. / Joe Larese/The Journal News

Written by **THERESA JUVA-BROWN**

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VALHALLA — With strained labor relations in the wake of 400 job cuts and leaders still grappling with a \$26 million budget gap, there seems to be no panacea for the woes at Westchester Medical Center.

The medical center is dealing with the same financial problems as other hospitals — declining Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements — but because it's a public-benefit corporation, it has the added pressure of state pension payments, said Kevin Dahill, president of Northern Metropolitan Hospital Association, which represents hospitals in the Hudson Valley. That contribution is projected to hit \$70 million by next year, hospital officials have said.

"There's going to be a continuing need for 'safety-net' hospitals, and there is going to have to be a way to ensure they are around

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and that they are viable," Dahill said. "Exactly how that's going to occur is anybody's guess."

As the region's safety-net hospital, the medical center provides advanced care and treats many uninsured patients and those on Medicaid and Medicare. About half its patients get government-subsidized health coverage.

The past year has been filled with major changes at the medical center including hundreds of layoffs, an overhaul of psychiatric emergency services and the subsequent private takeover of more than 100 jobs at the Behavioral Health Center. Labor unions said they fear more cuts and declining patient care, while hospital leaders argue they are trying to keep the organization afloat.

"We're not going to privatize the hospital, but if there are certain aspects where we can preserve the mission yet improve the economics, we will be forced to do it," said Mark Tulis, chairman of the medical center's board of directors. "We have been set adrift by the county and by the state, and we have to do what's necessary."

The medical center, which sits on county property, used to be part of Westchester County government. Amid concern it was entangled in politics and limited in how it could generate revenue, a state law turned it into an independent, public-benefit corporation in 1998. A hospital board of directors, appointed by elected officials, oversees staffing and the budget.

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It wasn't a smooth transition. In the early 2000s, poor financial management led to a near-collapse that required tens of millions of dollars in county aid to fix.

But that crisis is different than what's happening now, medical center CEO Michael Israel said. The medical center no longer gets county funding and is receiving smaller reimbursements. On top of that, it has soaring pension costs it can't control.

"We, along with all other hospitals, have to figure out how to do more with less," Israel said. "We want to do as much for employees as we can. But people have to open their eyes. Take a look at what's happening across the country. The dollars are not there."

Though the medical center doesn't get county money, it doesn't pay rent under its 60-year lease with the county. And until the end of 2009, the county covered the hospital's utility costs.

Assemblyman Thomas Abinanti, D-Greenburgh, said the medical center can't solve its financial problems until there is a "united front" between leaders and labor.

"The first thing is they need to get together and talk," said Abinanti, a former county legislator who chaired its medical center committee. "It's not just about contracts, but how to best run the hospital. There has to be a better relationship between management and labor, and that doesn't exist now."

Peter Piazza, president of the Civil Service Employees Association at the medical center, described the situation as "somber and dire." He said that although officials claim a major loss in revenue, they haven't complied with state law and been transparent with their records, a charge the medical center disputes.

He also criticized the county Board of Legislators for arguing that the medical center is a state entity and refusing to step in. Piazza noted the county board, executive and governor work together to appoint the hospital board of directors.

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“The elected officials of this community play an important role in the survival and viability of this magnificent institution,” Piazza wrote in an email. “They have abandoned that responsibility.”

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The office of County Executive Rob Astorino declined to be interviewed for this article.

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Board of Legislators Chairman Ken Jenkins said the issue is whether the public-benefit corporation model still works.

"We can put different board members in, but does that change the economic situation? No," he said.

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County Legislator William Ryan, former board chairman and member of a medical center financial oversight committee, said the hospital's current struggle raises questions about whether government should help again.

"I don't know if there is the political will to do that," he said.

In the meantime, it needs to focus on staying competitive with other hospitals, Ryan said.

"Historically, they have had top-notch physicians, top-notch nursing, and those are critically important to the success of that medical center," he said. "They have to aggressively market how good they are."

The medical center spent an estimated \$60 million on capital improvements last year and plans to spend another \$63 million this year, officials said. It also recently recruited prominent physicians such as Dr. Juan Asensio, a trauma surgeon, and Dr. Mitchell Cairo, a leading pediatric hematologist/oncologist.

"I am very optimistic about the future of the medical center and see continued expansion, continued program development and continued recruitment of new physicians," Israel said. "I think the medical center five years from now will look very different from the way it does now."

"The level of care being delivered here is absolutely superb," he said. "I do not believe what we are doing hurts that."

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