

Valley News Dispatch

Acute care facility to open in Allegheny Valley Hospital

By Tom Yerace

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LifeCare Hospitals of Pittsburgh is preparing to open an Alle-Kiski Valley facility for long-term acute care patients in, of all places, Allegheny Valley Hospital.

Linda Jaskolka, spokeswoman for Allegheny Valley, confirmed that LifeCare, a Texas-based, for-profit company, hopes to open its new facility in Harrison by mid-October.

Allegheny Valley Hospital is part of the Alle-Kiski Medical Center which, in turn, is a branch of the West Penn Allegheny Health System,

"They are leasing space from us," Jaskolka said. "They operate a hospital within a hospital. They are independent of Alle-Kiski Medical Center, but they occupy space within our hospital."

Attempts to reach Kathi Wahl, LifeCare's senior business development coordinator, for comment were unsuccessful.

The arrangement will have no adverse effect on the hospital's operations or employees, Jaskolka said.

"They take care of complex patients who need long-term care in a hospital," she said.

Such patients usually are dealing with two or more injuries and/or medical conditions, such as cardio-vascular problems and diabetes.

"They are licensed differently than we are so they can accept these patients and keep them over a longer period of time," Jaskolka said. She said that Medicare and health insurance company rules prevent Allegheny Valley from engaging in the same kind of care. She said the average length of stay for patients at AVH is about four days.

"It gives us that next level of care that a lot of patients need," Jaskolka said. "They are too sick to go home or too sick to go back to a nursing home, if that is where they are living."

According to Jaskolka, LifeCare will have about 35 beds in a now-vacant area on Allegheny Valley's first floor. It will take up an entire nursing unit, AVH's former 1A orthopedic unit now housed on the second floor. She said that was done about four to six months ago.

Officials at AVH and its parent system started discussing the possibility of leasing space to LifeCare in June or July.

"It just makes good sense to offer this service in the community, utilize space that we are not using and provide a continuum of care that we could offer but the insurance companies and Medicare guidelines don't allow," Jaskolka said.

According to its website, LifeCare operates at 19 locations in nine states, including at Suburban General Hospital in Bellevue.

Stephanie Suran, communications manager for the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council, said the establishment of long-term acute care facilities in existing hospitals is a continuing trend. She cited data from 2008, the latest year available,

"In 2008, 15 out of 26 long-term acute care hospitals said that they occupied space in a general acute care hospital," Suran said. "In our reports we have noticed that one of the factors that has facilitated acute care growth is that a lot of facilities have space they can utilize."

She said that by doing that, acute care hospitals can be established more quickly and the cost is considerably less than building a new facility.

Overall, acute care facilities have increased through out the state.

Suran said number of medical/surgical acute beds grew from less than 600 in 1999 to just under 1,400 in 2008.

Also, the number of patient days for acute care facilities has risen during that time. She said the number of patient days in fiscal year 1999 was more than 130,000 and by 2008 it more than doubled to a little more than 300,000.

Jaskolka said Allegheny Valley Hospital's arrangement with LifeCare is advantageous to both parties. She said LifeCare will be able to use ancillary services from AVH such as housekeeping, dietary, x-ray and the medical laboratory.

At the same time, it provides local patients and their families needed medical services in a convenient location.

"The patients are still in the community and their families can come to visit them here in the community," Jaskolka said.

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