



THE CLEVELAND
NEWS LEADER

North Sunflower Cuts Ribbon on State-of-the-Art Rooms

Published: December 10, 2006

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RULEVILLE, Miss. – In the latest chapter of a 30-month transformation story that might be titled “The Little Hospital That Could,” North Sunflower Medical Center on Thursday officially cut the ribbon on five new Swing-Bed Unit rooms that have the feel of a home away from home.

Work began back in the summer, as a crew gutted the old, low-tech hospital rooms to make way for the renovation. Each of the new VIP-style rooms represents about a \$60,000 investment, as North Sunflower Medical worked with Wellness Environments, a Nashville, Tenn.-based firm that designed the relatively swanky spaces. The new rooms are tailored to create a relaxing environment, and they feature ample seating for family members and friends, as well as backlit artwork.

The Swing-Bed Unit specializes in rehabilitation care, helping patients who need a little extra attention before they are discharged.

Billy Marlow, administrator of North Sunflower Medical, explained when the project began that the new Wellness Environments rooms would be compatible with a patient-care philosophy in Ruleville that combines a high level of personal service with options and amenities that one can’t find elsewhere.

Wellness Environments said that the financing aspect of the renovation plan also merits attention for its innovativeness. “The county-owned hospital initiated a five-year operating lease for the rooms, freeing up capital funds for use elsewhere in the project,” Wellness Environments said in prepared remarks. “The operating lease has competitive rates, flexible terms and options to renew, upgrade, purchase or return the equipment at the end of the lease term.”

The goal is for North Sunflower Medical to incur expenses associated with the project over a shorter period – five years, as opposed to say, a 10-year capital lease. Additionally, the arrangement will allow the medical center to assign project costs in a targeted way to specific departments rather than assigning them throughout the whole institution in a blanket manner.

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North Sunflower Medical Center, which began operations more than half a century ago as North Sunflower County Hospital, was on the ropes financially by 2004, but the transition to Critical Access Hospital status in the fall of that year improved Medicare reimbursements and substantially contributed to the hospital's revival under the leadership of Marlow, who did not draw a salary during the early months of his tenure as administrator.

The unveiling of the new VIP-style swing-bed rooms Thursday is another element in a business approach that builds stability for North Sunflower Medical through the cultivation of new profit centers. The rural health care clinic that is part of the Medical Center complex saw some 1,458 patients in an entire year in 2004, but has seen a 590-percent growth in traffic. The clinic is open from 8 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week.

Meanwhile, the home-health unit that is licensed in 11 counties has experienced a 423-percent burst of growth, Marlow said Thursday. He is especially proud of an annual payroll at NSMC that exceeds \$9 million for a work force of 250 people, and he cites a 92-percent satisfaction rate among employees, as measured by a survey.

The medical center also recently added a helicopter pad to its grounds and a children's entertainment center to the waiting area in the rural health clinic. For additional information about North Sunflower Medical Center, see www.northsunflower.com.

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