

Pennsylvania: Braddock hospital closes its doors for good

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The University of Pittsburgh Medical System (UPMC) is closing Braddock hospital on Sunday, delivering another blow to this once thriving steel town south of Pittsburgh along the Monongahela River.

Braddock hospital has served Braddock and surrounding communities for more than 100 years. UPMC, which bought the hospital in 1996, says that it is necessary to close the hospital because it has declining admissions and has been losing money during the last few years.

The hospital is the largest employer in the town, which has seen its population shrink from 18,000 to around 3,000 today. Boarded up businesses and vacant lots line Braddock's main street.

Nancy Jenkins, an operating room nurse who has worked at the hospital for 10 years, said, "This is awful; there is no other way of putting it. It is like having your family uprooted, nobody is happy about the idea.

"This is a great hospital. Most patients say that everything runs real smooth. The OR [operating room] has only been here 11 years. I think it is the newest OR in all of UPMC's hospitals. Even people who are removing the OR equipment say that this is the best OR that they have seen.

"This will devastate the community. Many people don't have easy transportation and it will take hours just to get routine things done. We have the only cafeteria and ATM in Braddock. During lunchtime, many seniors come here to eat lunch and socialize. I also do community outreach to students. I go and do talks and things in the local schools."

UPMC has said that all the employees of the hospital will get other jobs. However, Nancy explained that each employee has to apply for jobs just like any other applicant who wants to work for the hospital. "I don't

have a job yet. I have put in applications, but I live further down the Mon Valley. Only McKeesport hospital is closer to me and there are rumors that that hospital will be closed next.

"There are people here with 20, 30 and even 40 years experience who are being forced to take jobs where they will have to travel farther, and work night and weekend shifts. Nobody likes this."

People are being told that they will have to travel to McKeesport, Monroeville or Pittsburgh. In addition to emergency room care, the hospital provides many outpatient services such as blood work and x-rays, which people will now have to travel other hospitals to obtain.

James Malloy and his daughter Olivia live in Braddock. James said, "I think this is terrible. I just moved here a year ago. I figured having the hospital just a few blocks away was a good thing. If one of my kids got sick or hurt they would have some place that we could get to in a few minutes."

Last fall the Port Authority announced that cuts in service that will take effect this March. Braddock is one of the communities that will see its bus service reduced.

"Traffic going into Pittsburgh is always bad," James continued. "If you get sick and have to go to Pittsburgh it will take much longer to get there. It takes an hour by bus and now the bus routes are being cut as well.

"Regardless of what they say, medicine is needed, we are humans and we get sick and hurt like everyone else and we need a place to go when that happens. Everything isn't peaches and cream and that extra time it takes to get to Pittsburgh or Monroeville might be somebody's life."

Democratic politicians have done nothing to stop the closure of the hospital. In 2008, the state gave UPMC \$3 million to help spruce up the hospital and the county

is building an apartment complex for senior citizens across the street from the hospital. Democratic Governor Ed Rendell has absented himself from the issue and Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato, the frontrunner in the democratic primary for governor, issued a few perfunctory statements against the closing and met with UPMC a few times. Nothing came of it.

Sharon Heath, who works in medical records, said, “I think it is really great that the whole community came together to try and keep the hospital open, but unfortunately it is closing. The staff is pretty much gone. I was hired on a temporary basis to fill in for a person who has already left.

“This hospital was good for everyone around here. They had a place that they could come to, walk if necessary, to get medical treatment if they needed it.”

Braddock, like most of the towns that dot the Mon Valley, was hard hit by the collapse in the steel industry in the 1980s. US Steel still operates the Edgar Thompson mill, but having once employed more than 10,000 workers it now has fewer than 800. Tax cuts and property reassessments given to the steel maker by government officials mean the borough now gets only a fraction of what it once received.

James Perrin said, “I’m a native of Braddock and I have always used that hospital. I have had a fractured elbow, broken ribs. I had two disks removed from my spine. This is real sad that it is closing. There is not another hospital for five miles. This hospital serves not only Braddock, but all the surrounding communities. There are many senior high-rises all over this area and these people depend upon this hospital for their health.

“The whole Mon Valley is suffering and this is going to make things worse. There is nothing wrong with that hospital. They say they can’t fill beds, but all they do is when someone comes in is to send them to Pittsburgh.”

Annette Baldwin said, “We need that hospital. I worked in that hospital years ago it is a good place. I had my second child there and an emergency operation to remove my appendix. My son stepped on a nail and I took him to that hospital. They said that in another 15 minutes the poison would have spread throughout his body.

“This is another blow to Braddock, the steel mill is all but gone. Most of the businesses are boarded up, the bank just closed. They say that they are not making any

money but the CEO made \$5 million last year.”

UPMC, supposedly a non-profit institution, is a massive health care company with 15 hospitals and dozens of outpatient and other facilities. Recently UPMC went into the health insurance business and has already become a major player. UPMC routinely reports profits of \$500 million a year and more, and the provider would stand to profit handsomely from the health care overhaul proposed by the Obama administration.

In the 1990s, UPMC went on a merger spree, buying up hospitals throughout the Pittsburgh area including Braddock, McKeesport, Montefiore, Shadyside and Mercy hospitals. They did this as part of their drive to dominate the health care market in the Pittsburgh region against its major competitor, Allegheny Hospital. UPMC used the hospitals in surrounding communities as feeders for its main hospital complex in Pittsburgh. UPMC has reported earnings above \$500 million in several of the last few years.

Now the company is claiming that Braddock hospital’s admissions rate is down and has lost \$27 million in the last six years. People feel that other hospitals located in poorer communities, such as McKeesport, will be soon to follow.



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