

Benefis Health System Community Health Improvement Plan 2023-2025



**Note From
Benefis Health
System Chief
Executive
Officer John
Goodnow**

Fellow Cascade County Residents,

Benefis Health System is pleased to release or plan to support the 2023-2025 Cascade County Community Health Improvement Plan.

At Benefis, our commitment to health starts with each patient and extends to our community. Though we serve about 230,000 residents in a vast 42,000-square-mile region, we never forget that the best care is personal. We treat each patient as we would a friend or family member. Our goal is to help each person we serve live their best life possible.

As the only comprehensive nonprofit health system in Great Falls, Benefis includes a hospital with a Level II trauma center, clinics supported by more than 300 employed providers, senior care services, home health, a medical supplies business, a foundation, a Native American Welcoming Center, the operation of two rural medical centers, and a new expansion into Helena.

As the largest private employer in Cascade County and the primary provider of many essential health services in our region, we know we play a vital role in improving community health, and we take that responsibility seriously.

Our last report of this nature was drafted based on data collected in 2019. After that, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the healthcare landscape. Despite facing unprecedented challenges, we pushed forward, implementing plans and programs focused on optimizing care access, building our future workforce, and expanding services.

We look forward to continuing our work over the next three years to continue to improve the health of our community.

Sincerely,
John Goodnow

Table of Contents

Introduction and Background.....	1
About Benefis Health System.....	2
Summary of 2020-2022 Health Improvement Efforts.....	3
Priority Area One: Improve Cascade County Residents’ Ability to Access Appropriate Healthcare.....	3
Priority Area Two: Reduce Substance Misuse, Including Alcohol, Tobacco, and Legal/Illegal Drugs.....	9
Priority Area Three: Increase the Percentage of Cascade County Residents at a Healthy Weight.....	10
Priority Area Four: Decrease the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases in Cascade County.....	10
2023-2025 Health Improvement Plan.....	12
Priority Area One: Improve Cascade County Residents’ Ability to Access Appropriate Healthcare.....	12
Priority Area Two: Reduce Substance Misuse, Including Alcohol, Tobacco, and Legal/Illegal Drugs.....	15
Priority Area Three: Increase the Percentage of Cascade County Residents at a Healthy Weight.....	16
Priority Area Four: Decrease the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases in Cascade County.....	16
Conclusion.....	17

Introduction and Background

Every three years, organizations in our community come together to conduct a Community Health Needs Assessment, which is a study outlining top health concerns throughout the community.

Benefis uses each iteration of the document to formulate a coordinating plan to help our community achieve its health-related goals. This document contains a summary of the activities Benefis completed in support of the goals outlined in our 2020-2022 improvement plan.

In addition to that summary, this report outlines our plans to support community health improvement going forward based on the latest community goals, outlined in the 2023-2025 Cascade County Community Health Needs Assessment.

The 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment identified four priorities:

- **Access to Care** – We aim to improve Cascade County residents' ability to access appropriate healthcare.
- **Substance Misuse** – We aim to reduce the improper use of alcohol, tobacco, and legal/illegal drugs.
- **Healthy Weight** – We aim to increase the percentage of Cascade County residents at a healthy weight.
- **Child Abuse** – We aim to decrease the number of child abuse and neglect cases in our region.

About Benefis Health System

Behind every statistic is a story.

At Benefis Health System, we believe that the pursuit of better health requires going beyond the walls of our hospital, clinics, senior care facilities, and specialty services.

Our goal is not just to provide the best treatment for patients but also to help the people of our community avoid health crises. We'd rather offer every skier a free helmet than treat a concussion later; we'd prefer to hold a class now so a newly diagnosed diabetic can learn to manage her insulin and diet than have to perform an amputation later; and we'd choose seeing a patient today to treat a minor condition over waiting until it becomes a major problem tomorrow.

Benefis began with the Columbus Hospital, founded in 1892 by Catholic Sisters, and Deaconess Hospital, founded by Methodists in 1898. The hospitals merged in 1996, creating Benefis. Our name comes from Latin roots "bene-" for good and "fis-" for faith and trust. Today our health system consists of not only a traditional hospital and more than 300 employed providers staffing outpatient clinics, but also assisted living and long-term care facilities, home health services, hospice care, and more.

Our commitment to the good health of our friends and neighbors has been the driving force behind our evolution from a hospital into a comprehensive health system. Benefis is recognized for clinical excellence by leading health ratings organizations and is also recognized as a great place to work.

We take seriously and are deeply involved in weighing results from the community health needs assessment, in responding to the needs identified, and in thinking through what comes next. This document is our way of sharing that ongoing conversation and updating stakeholders on the work we're doing to make our community healthier.

We talk in numbers, programs, dollars, and services, but behind every statistic are the people whose lives have been changed in ways large and small through our efforts.

Summary of 2020-2022 Health Improvement Efforts

Over the past few years, Benefis has been committed to furthering the initiatives outlined in our 2020-2022 Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). The following describes our efforts to work toward the issues identified in the county’s health needs assessment.

Priority Area One: Improve Cascade County Residents’ Ability to Access Appropriate Healthcare

At Benefis, our commitment to health starts with each patient and extends to our community. We know access to quality medical care improves lives within our community. Benefis works tirelessly to ensure that everyone in our community who needs care can get it in a convenient and affordable manner.

Streamlining Access Processes

We have hundreds of phone numbers at Benefis. A previous evaluation indicated that a single floor of one of our medical office buildings alone had 48 incoming lines. At the end of each line was one person who may not be at his or her desk at a given moment. It makes people anxious when they leave a voicemail. They might call again six more times throughout the day while the nurse is trying to carve out time to get back to everyone, or they try a few other numbers, wandering around the phones of the system and becoming more and more frustrated. Sometimes patients, especially those already intimidated by doctors, just give up when there are too many steps between them and healthcare, no matter the stakes. That’s why we created the Patient Access Center in 2021. With the center, we can ensure we are getting the right information from patients and that they are seeing the correct provider at the right time to maximize efficiency.

The Patient Access Center team uses integrated systems and processes that facilitate scheduling and financially clearing patient services in a consistent manner. At this time, the center services all of our ancillary areas (i.e. lab and imaging procedures) along with our internal medicine, family medicine, and pediatric departments.

Nurses find that the Patient Access Center improves their workflow. It lets them focus on the patients standing in front of them. We know people don’t like to stand around watching someone talk on the phone while they wait for service. Some patients have been a little reluctant to share personal information with the access center, but when they do, it is a wonder of efficiency. The center can set up a digital task for the nurse, who then knows what exactly the patient needs before calling them – turning potentially two or three calls back into one call. The center also allows us to cultivate experts in navigating pre-authorization, with some employees focusing on certain insurance companies. It’s more effective and more efficient.

We continue to work to refine the center's processes and call handling times, with an ultimate goal of expanding the number of appointments the center serves.

Standardizing our access processes across our services will undoubtedly make it easier to access our care.

Focusing on Affordability

Benefis has been focused on cost reduction since 2008, realizing that reducing our own costs can translate into less cost being shifted to commercially insured patients. Still, we intend to approach this issue as an even greater priority going forward as lack of affordable healthcare continues to plague patients not only across northcentral Montana, but also the nation.

Part of Benefis' mission is caring for the underserved. We provide millions of dollars each year in uncompensated care, and we also provide certain unprofitable services, such as behavioral health treatment, because they are vital for the community. Additionally, patients who pay their bill upfront or within 30 days of treatment receive a 15% prompt-pay discount.

Beyond these efforts, Benefis also now offers an online price estimator tool. The tool uses information patients provide regarding selected medical services, health insurance information, and other elements to generate an estimate for how much they may expect to pay out of pocket for several hundred of our most commonly performed services.

Another important way Benefis helps our community obtain affordable healthcare is through our foundation. Since 1998, Benefis Foundation has connected patients with the support they need and donors with the causes closest to their hearts. Just a few of the programs the Foundation offers include the Angel Fund, which helps families who must travel for their children's medical care, and Gift of Life housing, which offers a free place to stay for patients receiving cancer treatment or who may have a child in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Facilitating Care Convenience

The more convenient the format and location of care offerings are, the more likely patients are to access the care. To that end, in 2020, Benefis established Bridge by Benefis, a mobile app-based system where patients can seek virtual care from a mobile device or computer.

Additionally, the new Benefis Women's and Children's Center opened in December 2021. The 48,000-square-foot, three-story outpatient center along 10th Avenue South brings together services that had been located across a variety of buildings and campuses to offer moms with children greater convenience when seeking our services. The building is home to pediatric physical, occupational, and speech therapies, basic lab services, screening mammography, pediatric providers, and our women's health team. By bringing all these specialties under one roof, we are able to save families,

especially mothers, time. Appointments can be scheduled for the same day, allowing women to take care of themselves as well as their children.

Recruitment and Retention

The healthcare industry currently faces shortages across nearly every discipline. Without people to provide care, we cannot continue to maintain, let alone grow, the number of services we offer to our community. To that end, we continue to focus heavily on recruitment and retention, particularly in the nurse and provider realms.

Despite the staffing challenges posed by COVID-19, Benefis has increased its number of providers over the past three years, growing its medical group from 300 employed providers to more than 340. These growth efforts involve dedicated focus on bolstering our presence in services such as primary care while enhancing our ability to offer new specialties not otherwise available in the community to our patient base.

We have also focused heavily on nursing recruitment and retention, working diligently to strengthen our relationships with area nursing schools that serve as a hiring pipeline for us. At the same time, we have rolled our innovative retention strategies for our nursing staff, including incentivizing them to work additional shifts to cover the increasing level of demand being placed on hospitals treating inpatients in the post-COVID environment.

Training our Future Workforce

We do not currently have enough graduates from American medical schools to meet our needs. The problem is acute in Montana, where we desperately need more doctors, especially in more rural communities. Our nation is also facing a nursing shortage, and training is a key component to addressing this problem as well.

To help address this, Benefis successfully led an effort to get a medical school established in Great Falls. Touro College Montana, an osteopathic medical school in Great Falls, has begun accepting students and is expected to officially open its doors in the summer of 2023. Multiple Benefis providers have already committed to take part in teaching and providing residencies. The school is expected to graduate 125 medical students per year.

In addition to providing an immense amount of assistance to facilitate the school's successful development in Great Falls, Benefis has also begun to develop an apartment complex, Aurora Apartment Homes, next to the school. This apartment complex will avoid putting more pressure on the existing Great Falls housing market as new students and faculty join the community.

Benefis also donated land for a new nursing education building in Great Falls to be built with a portion of a \$101 million investment by philanthropists Mark and Robyn Jones to Montana State University. Having more nursing school slots in our area will help generate more nurses who will hopefully stay near where they went to school to seek employment after graduation. Benefis works to be an ideal first employer for new nurses

who gain access to our residency and development programs to refine their skills as they enter the workforce.

Up to this point, Benefis has accommodated a small number (up to eight) of third- and fourth-year medical students for rotations on our campus. Beginning in 2020, we significantly increased that number, hosting 62 medical students, 10 physician assistant students, and 11 nurse practitioner students. In 2021 Benefis hosted 72 medical students, 10 physician assistant students and eight nurse practitioner students. In 2022 we hosted 52 medical students, 21 physician assistant students, and 10 nurse practitioner students. We plan to continue to increase the number of students we train with the ultimate goal of hiring many of them as full-time professionals to treat our region's patients.

Bolstering Care Coordination

In 2019, we received a cardiovascular grant to focus on improving hypertension, or high blood pressure, and hyperlipidemia, or high cholesterol, in our primary care patient population.

The grant allowed us to hire a case manager who follows patients with hypertension and gestational hypertension through a remote patient monitoring app. The grant also provides blood pressure monitors to those in need. We have seen measurable progress through this program during the last three years.

Given its success in the cardiovascular arena, Benefis has also expanded the use of the remote patient monitoring tool to 12 other health conditions, including things like post-operative monitoring following a total joint replacement. The app the tool relies on can be used on any mobile device, and the kit patients receive upon initial enrollment includes all the Bluetooth biometric devices needed for monitoring. This tool has been a true game-changer in allowing us to more easily track patient conditions in a way that allows us to coordinate their ongoing care needs without requiring them to come onsite for an unnecessary number of visits.

In 2021, Benefis established a dedicated program to streamline post-hospital callbacks for our primary care patients. After discharge, a nurse will contact the patient and their care partners to ensure that everyone understands the discharge instructions, received test results, and that the next step of the care is planned. The nurse assists with scheduling appointments if needed and contacts other specialties to coordinate care.

The program also collects patient feedback and uses that information to make improvements. The program nurse sits on the Benefis Readmissions Committee to promote care coordination.

In 2022, our ambulatory care pharmacists began conducting comprehensive medication reviews for our primary care patients with hypertension or hyperlipidemia. We are working to implement collaborative practice agreements between primary care providers and the ambulatory pharmacy to provide medication management for these patients.

In recent years, Benefis also began an overhaul of the various patient information binders given to patients who seek care in several specialty departments, such as the Heart and Vascular Institute, the Women's and Children's Center, the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), Sletten Cancer Institute, Benefis Rehabilitation Center, and Peace Hospice of Montana. There is also a binder for patients receiving a total joint replacement. These binders contain care instructions, treatment protocol descriptions, helpful tips, and organizational tools to promote better outcomes and higher follow-up rates. This overhaul is an ongoing process as Benefis continues to update patient binders with current and relevant information, so patients have answers and resources at their fingertips.

Lastly, Benefis has been a pioneer in coordinating patient care among the population struggling with Long COVID. As new information about the symptoms of the condition became available, Benefis quickly stood up a multidisciplinary team of numerous specialists from across our organization to help struggling patients. The program has since garnered national attention for its success in remedying the significant long-term symptoms following a COVID diagnosis that many patients had begun to fear they may have to live with forever.

Building Our Screening and Preventative Programs

When COVID-19 struck, Benefis was on the forefront of treatment, including vaccinations. We led the community COVID-19 vaccine clinic when immunizations first became available to the public in early 2021. The clinic administered 26,269 doses against the deadly virus before wrapping up as vaccine supply allowed local pharmacies to take over the vaccination effort.

Beyond that, we continue to work to promote and encourage various screenings so that patients access care at appropriate junctures before a disease becomes too advanced to easily treat. We continue to refine our programs to track various screenings, working to understand and target gaps in screenings – tests that can save lives.

Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute (SCI) provides annual cancer screening programs to the community at no cost, including for lung and skin cancer. SCI also promotes cancer screening activities through community outreach and offers genetic counseling for patients who have a family history of cancer.

Every summer, Benefis hosts the Men & Machines Car & Bike Show where men can show off their cars while receiving important health information. With this event, Benefis aims to reach adult men, a segment of the population that often delays preventative care.

Investing in Care Technology

Benefis East Campus recently added three new wide-bore MRIs, representing a significant investment in high-quality imaging and patient comfort. The machines not

only provide better quality imagery, they also cut the time to complete an imaging procedure in half, allowing us to see more patients in the same amount of time.

We also became the first location in Montana to offer a new knee surgery robot that brings increased precision and personalization to joint replacement. The Zimmer-Biomet ROSA Knee System (ROSA stands for robotic surgical assistant) helps Dr. Jace Bullard carry out his surgical plan with exacting alignment. With patients living longer and getting total joint replacements younger, it's even more important to have as perfect an alignment as possible for greatest prosthesis longevity.

In April 2022, two patients were the first to undergo a transcatheter aortic valve replacement, or TAVR, at Benefis. Cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. Steven Bailey and interventional cardiologist Dr. Shawn Kelly and their team ran an artificial heart valve into place through the femoral artery during the inaugural Benefis TAVR. The valve is crimped small enough to travel to the heart via the artery and is then opened up in place. The failing valve stays. Previously, patients who qualified for the surgery would be required to travel out of state, adding financial and time burdens to an already difficult medical situation. This is a procedure that will continue to be performed at Benefis.

Improving Behavioral Healthcare

The need for behavioral health services in our community continues to grow. The COVID-19 pandemic brought additional stressors and increased isolation.

Over the last three years we have expanded our behavioral health program to include intensive outpatient programming and partial hospitalization programming that allows us to have more resources for our patients along the care continuum. To improve access, we have added resources to our consult liaison team to help patients get to the appropriate level of care when they enter the hospital.

Pediatric behavioral health is too-often a neglected part of childhood wellness in Montana. That's why, when we created the new Benefis Women's and Children's Center, we increased the space dedicated to the mission of serving this need in our community, led by experienced providers specializing in pediatric psychiatry and pediatric neuropsychology. The once-fragmented pediatric psychiatry and neuropsychology services are now offered in one location, allowing our expanded team to join forces in a collaborative environment.

Our pediatric behavioral health floor includes things such as a cool-down room, where overwhelmed children can take time to decompress. We also ensure families are part of their child's treatment. Parents can use a special room with a one-way window that allows them to observe sessions and learn techniques for promoting good behavior.

The new Women's and Children's Center also provides the opportunity to bring more resources to new parents. Benefis has partnered with The Meadowlark Initiative to establish the Benefis Perinatal Program. A dedicated perinatal counselor and care

coordinator provide services for patients who are pregnant and up to one year after delivering a baby. The program focuses on perinatal depression and anxiety, along with treatment for pregnant women struggling with substance use.

Meeting the Needs of Native American Patients

At Benefis, we believe it's important to provide quality healthcare to everyone in our community. Through our Papoose Rattler Memorial Native American Welcoming Center, we offer a warm, friendly environment and a variety of services that support the traditions and culture of Native American patients and their families.

The center offers a number of resources for those who come to Benefis from out of town — for either immediate family members of patients or patients who travel here for an appointment. We offer access to a fax machine, copier, computer, and phone for calls related to the patient, a light meal, hot beverages, free, temporary housing (as available), and referrals for local, affordable lodging. The center also maintains a list of organizations offering referrals for clothing and other basic necessities, local churches, and other resources. Over the past three years, annual visits to the center have continued to increase.

Continuing Our Regional Focus

We understand the challenges some of our patients face when it comes to traveling to Great Falls for care. Benefis now has a critical care ground transport vehicle that is used when the Mercy Flight helicopter is not an option or not the best option. The vehicle can bring patients to Great Falls from rural locations that don't have adequate ambulance resources.

We also partnered with a local taxi company to provide complimentary transportation to and from non-emergency visits for qualified patients living out of town. Benefis continues to build a robust outreach program for patients who live farther away. Specialists in the areas of cardiology, pediatrics women's health, podiatry, nephrology, and more travel to rural areas to reach patients. They also provide telemedicine services.

Expansion plans are moving forward in Helena as well. Internal medicine and gastroenterology providers are seeing patients in the Benefis Helena Downtown space. An urgent care clinic with space for outreach providers is open at Benefis Helena Northeast. Benefis Helena Imaging is providing state of the art services at two locations, and construction underway on the Benefis Helena Specialty Center.

Priority Area Two: Reduce Substance Misuse, Including Alcohol, Tobacco, and Legal/Illegal Drugs

Continuing Screening Programs

Tobacco is a significant risk factor for multiple cancers. With that in mind, Benefis providers continue to screen patients for tobacco use at wellness visits and aid with

cessation intervention. Our pediatric providers continue to screen and counsel adolescents against drugs and alcohol.

Supporting Drug Management

The Benefis Emergency Department developed guidelines to significantly reduce opioid use. The guidelines identify conditions and disease states that warrant a non-opioid option to begin treatment.

In 2021, Benefis implemented a prescription drug monitoring program in our our electronic health record system. This function allows our providers to query the Montana State prescription drug registry prior to prescribing a controlled substance with the click of a button in the patient's chart. In 2022, our providers utilized this function more than 8,000 times.

We also continue to offer safe options for the disposal of unused prescriptions and other drugs through our drug takeback program, which allows members of the community to anonymously leave drugs in one of the secure drop boxes across our campuses.

Priority Area Three: Increase the Percentage of Cascade County Residents at a Healthy Weight

Knowing that obesity is linked to diabetes, stroke, cancer, and many other health conditions, Benefis continues important healthy lifestyle programs and pursues services that promote nutrition and fitness. We have also worked to expand our offerings into new locations, including developing dedicate physical therapy locations at each of the community's Peak Health and Wellness Center locations in the past two years.

Priority Area Four: Decrease the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases in Cascade County

Great Falls has grave child abuse and neglect issues. Benefis is prepared to support community efforts to implement new strategies to improve family dynamics. We take the safety and health of all our patients very seriously and will continue to follow mandatory reporting guidelines for cases of suspected abuse and neglect.

The new Benefis Women's and Children's Center allows our providers a greater opportunity to collaborate with one another, taking a multidisciplinary approach to helping patients and families address complex issues that can lead to abuse.

The Benefis Giving Closet at Alliance for Youth's Youth Resource Center opened in 2021. Benefis donated \$25,000 in 2020 for the new center and established the giving closet, which has donated clothing and supplies for basic hygiene and school needs. "Shopping" the closet is free for the young people (ages 13-20) the center will

serve. The 16,000-square-foot center also has laundry machines, showers, Wi-Fi, computers, a food pantry, transportation assistance, and will serve a hot dinner daily.

Benefis folks also contribute their time as volunteers to the resource center. Benefis is helping with clinical and non-clinical training, and the Benefis recruitment team is offering youth from the center help with the job application process, resume creation, mock interviews, and interview tips. The center is just a few blocks from East Campus, and we look forward to an ongoing partnership as we both remain committed to the health of our community's children.

Benefis also partners with the Great Falls Community Food Bank's Backpacks4Kids Program, which provides local elementary students with food to take home during holidays and weekends. Benefis providers volunteered to stuff backpacks, and Benefis added a contribution to the program in 2022 that covered 5,000 meals.

2023-2025 Health Improvement Plan

Our work is not finished. As we envision a healthier future in Cascade County, we have set a plan to improve the community's health over the next three years.

Priority Area One: Improve Cascade County Residents' Ability to Access Appropriate Healthcare

As a non-profit health system, Benefis is committed to reinvesting into what we do best: caring for the communities we serve. We do this through programs, staffing, technology, treatment, and training. In the next five years, Benefis plans to reinvest \$245 million into facility, technology, and equipment upgrades for enhanced patient care.

Improving Our Electronic Medical Record System

One of our most significant upcoming upgrades is moving our electronic medical record system to Epic. For patients, the new software will mean continuity across Benefis, allowing providers to better coordinate care. Epic also offers an easier-to-use patient portal to view medical records, schedule appointments, request prescription refills, see balances, pay bills, and more. For us, it's going to mean better productivity and connectivity, easier billing, better documentation, and patient care enhancements. The Epic system will also support expanded virtual care options for patients.

We expect to see an easier process getting new hires and students up to speed since they already will be familiar with the system given its heavy utilization in training settings. We also have pulled our own people into the project to gain their insight into how to improve workflow and guide the process. We have rented space in downtown Great Falls that will house our team of 45 Epic professionals. It's a temporary space to build the project, but a permanent team, and we expect to launch Epic at Benefis in the spring of 2024.

Expanding the Endoscopy Laboratory

Right now, the Benefis Endoscopy Department is booking appointments six months out. That delay can impact a patient's treatment if their procedure results in bad news. Endoscopy has outgrown its space, and that's why Benefis is planning a new endoscopy lab that will double the current square footage. The new design will take workflow into account. We'll see procedure rooms large enough for procedures that use larger equipment or require more people to administer. There will be more counterspace, monitors in every room, and standardization so it's easy to find things. Stretchers will fit better. No longer will pre- and post-procedure patients be in the same place, with people about to be put under listening to someone else find out they have cancer.

This change will help eliminate the current appointment backlog we face in the crucial service, improving access and outcomes for our patients.

Enhancing Urgent Care/Employee Health

One of our assets is a 27,000-square-foot site along 10th Avenue South that was formerly the home of Spectrum Medical/Community Care. We plan to move our main urgent care clinic and employee/occupational health services to the building, along with ambulatory pharmacy services. Similar to the philosophy we implemented with the establishment of our Women's and Children's Center, collocating multiple services from different locations under one roof is expected to facilitate better coordination and convenience while adding room for growth.

Through this change, we will expand our current Health Plan Clinic's hours, and potentially expand it to more people beyond just our employees and their dependents. This, along with potentially expanding the types of patients eligible to utilize our ambulatory pharmacy, will increase access to affordable healthcare in our community.

Adding Specialty Pharmacy Services

We're adding our own specialty pharmacy services with the intent of getting more people in our community more affordable access to specialty drugs. Right now, the drugs are so expensive and hard to access that many people are noncompliant with the drug regimens we prescribe. Having specialty pharmacy services available at Benefis will better equip us to coordinate and source high-cost prescriptions for patients who need them. Currently, many of those patients rely solely on third-party coordination of such prescriptions from mail order pharmacies that partner with their insurance companies.

Creating a Residency Program

In the coming years, Benefis intends to establish an internal medicine residency program to help train new physicians while also expanding primary care access to certain groups of patients through a residency clinic. More than three-quarters of residents nationwide stay at their residency site for full-time employment after the completion of a residency, making the program a vital component to continued physician recruitment. Additionally, many experienced physicians prefer to practice at hospitals with residency and other training programs, as helping with the training of the next generation of providers is rewarding and can lead to practice efficiencies for the physician helping with the training.

Expanding Behavioral Health Services

Benefis recently received a three-year grant from the Montana Healthcare Foundation to support integrating behavioral health and primary care. The project will improve behavioral health access, care delivery, patient outcomes, and the experience for both patients and providers in women's health, pediatrics, and family medicine.

In the next three years we will also continue to bolster our consult liaison team and add more behavioral health providers. Our long-term goal is to combine more of our behavioral health services together in one location. This will be a major focus for

Benefis in the years to come given the impact behavioral health has on the need for various other services.

Revisoning Sletten Cancer Institute

When donors joined together to build Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute to provide the best in comprehensive cancer care close to home, they lit the dark path that follows a cancer diagnosis with hope, compassion, and generosity. Seventeen years later, they are uniting again to keep SCI on the cutting edge of cancer care.

We have embarked on a revisioning project for the center in response to changes in cancer care and growing need. We are remodeling the space to dramatically increase the size of the infusion suite and the pharmacy in the building, as well as the provider clinic space. The growing genetic counseling program also will have an expanded space to continue its cancer prevention mission. We will be establishing a teaching kitchen where patients will learn from trained dietitians, chefs, and each other about how to stay nourished to better tolerate treatments and reduce complications.

Renovating Our Dermatology Space

We're expanding our Dermatology and Mohs Surgery capacity through a renovation to Medical Office Building 30 at our West Campus. In addition to providing a fresh newly remodeled space, the expansion of the second floor will allow us to maximize convenience with a single check-in location for our dermatology patients, expand capacity for Mohs surgery, and provide room for future growth of dermatology. We will also move our newly combined Plastic Surgery and Medical Aesthetics clinic to the ground floor, where our board-certified plastic surgeon and specially trained medical aesthetic professionals will provide comprehensive surgical and non-surgical procedures in a modern and private setting.

Expanding the Patient Access Center

Over the next few years, we will be expanding our Patient Access Center. Our overarching vision is to have an efficient call handling system across our array of services that standardizes the scheduling process while maintaining a personal touch so people feel like they're being taken care of and heard. The expansion of the center will rely on the continued overhaul of our phone numbering structure and will be impacted by the Epic conversion described previously. Epic will expand the avenues through which patients reach us beyond phone to email and other types of messaging, while equipping representatives in the Patient Access Center with new types of tools to identify patient needs for routine screenings and other services when they call to schedule appointments.

Facilitating Medicaid Reenrollment

The Patient Access Center will also play a key role in assisting patients during the Montana Medicaid unwinding process in 2023.

In 2023, patients across the nation will be expected to reenroll for Medicaid coverage following a three-year period of continuous enrollment driven by the COVID-19

emergency. Without our intervention, this change is expected to drive a large drop-off in coverage, including for individuals who still qualify for Medicaid but don't properly complete onerous reenrollment requirements.

Benefis has organized a committee to navigate the challenges of the reenrollment process. Benefis will execute a communications strategy to inform those potentially impacted about the changes and provide resources to patients who may lose their coverage. This strategy includes community outreach events, advertising and marketing activities, and training for patient representatives so they can answer questions and encourage Medicaid patients to keep their contact information up to date with the Office of Public Assistance.

Continued Recruitment

We began employing providers in 2004, not knowing employment would become the preferred practice model across the country in the two decades ahead. Now nearly 75% of doctors nationwide are employees instead of having their own private practices. Our physician employment arm allows us to recruit providers like to fill holes in the community that private practices might never bring to Great Falls, and it simplifies life for providers who aren't interested in the business of medicine, allows them better work-life balance and security, and means they can treat a wider variety of patients due to the support a nonprofit system such as Benefis allows. Employing providers helps us align our visions, values, and mission with what we can accomplish together.

Our recruitment plan for the near future involves adding new providers with a focus on primary care. Our biggest challenge moving forward is that the demand for providers is far outstripping the supply. In order to support our infrastructure, our programs, and our broad reach across northcentral Montana, we must constantly recruit, and we usually are recruiting anywhere from 40-50 providers at all times.

We have a small but mighty recruiting team, and we also put a lot of effort into retention. In recent years, that has meant improved communication, responding to satisfaction surveys, and coaching.

We will also continue our focus on nursing recruitment, becoming increasingly integrated with our nursing school partners and doing everything we can to expand nurse training capacity across the state. It is only through tireless dedication to nurse training and recruitment that we can overcome the nurse shortage plaguing our nation and region.

Priority Area Two: Reduce Substance Misuse, Including Alcohol, Tobacco, and Legal/Illegal Drugs

Benefis representatives will continue their involvement with the local Substance Abuse Prevention Alliance. This includes maintaining drug takeback drop boxes at various Benefis locations.

Benefis supports other community organizations with goals to reduce substance misuse in our community, including Alliance for Youth, Family Promise, Big Brothers Big Sisters, YWCA Great Falls, and more.

Our employee wellness committee, Empower, offers employees a complimentary membership to Vorvida, a digital therapeutic that can help manage alcohol use.

Priority Area Three: Increase the Percentage of Cascade County Residents at a Healthy Weight

Benefis will continue to support healthy lifestyle programs and pursue programs that promote healthy nutrition and fitness.

In particular, Benefis is committed to promoting healthy lifestyles for its employees. The Empower employee wellness committee offers dietitian-approved nutrition content, access to in-house exercise programs, and free access to Headspace, an app specializing in meditation.

We know that obesity is linked to diabetes, stroke, cancer, and many other health conditions, and our providers will continue to counsel patients at risk for weight-related health problems. However, we also know that hunger is a problem for many of our community members for economic and other reasons.

Benefis will continue to support the Great Falls Community Food Bank and its efforts to provide food to those in need.

Sletten Cancer Institute recognizes that providing optimum nutrition and mitigating weight loss during cancer treatment can have multiple benefits for patients. The current renovation project at SCI includes the establishment of a teaching kitchen, where cancer patients will learn from trained dietitians, chefs, and each other. Eventually, the program offering through this kitchen may expand to focus on patients facing other types of conditions beyond cancer. This resource will be the first of its kind in our region and is expected to drive meaningful change in patient outcomes, which are often linked to nutrition throughout a course of treatment.

Priority Area Four: Decrease the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases in Cascade County

Great Falls continues to see serious child abuse and neglect issues. Benefis is prepared to support community efforts to implement new strategies to improve family dynamics. We take the safety and health of all our patients very seriously and will continue to follow mandatory reporting guidelines for cases of suspected abuse and neglect.

The Benefis Women's and Children's Center will continue to promote provider collaboration and expand its multidisciplinary approach to helping patients and families address complex issues that can lead to abuse.

Benefis will continue to support local organizations with focused initiatives to combat child abuse and neglect, including Alliance for Youth, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Great Falls Children's Receiving Home, The Dandelion Foundation, YWCA Great Falls, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, and more.

Conclusion

Benefis Health System is committed to supporting continuous health improvement in our community.

We look forward to working to make a difference in the lives of our community over the next three years and beyond. We measure each step forward using statistics, but we pursue these goals because behind those numbers we see people.

We pursue these goals because we know that behind every statistic is a story.