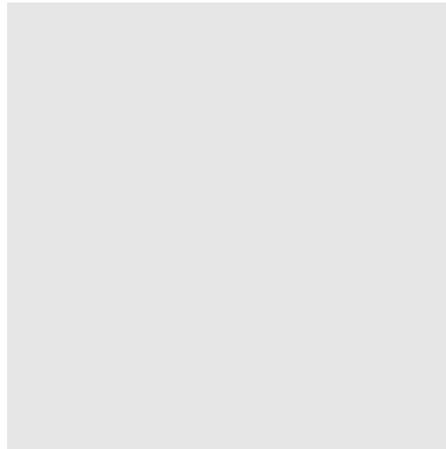


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More than a ribbon-cutting

By Richard Liekweg Aug 1, 2018



Richard Liekweg was named the next president and CEO of BJC HealthCare, effective January 1, 2018.

When most of us think about the significance of hospitals, it's natural for our thoughts to immediately turn to treatment of illness and disease. And that is understandable, given it is the first mission of all health care institutions.

However, on July 12, I took my place behind a green ribbon to celebrate the completion of construction of 50 units of affordable housing in a St. Louis city neighborhood known as Forest Park Southeast. This celebration was not only the culmination of a yearlong construction project, but a reflection of the impact hospitals have on the very fabric of their communities beyond providing excellent health services. By building attractive, affordable housing adjacent to a

vibrant medical campus where some 20,000 employees, residents, students, physicians, faculty, researchers and staff work every day, we also have the ability to build and strengthen our neighborhoods and our communities.

Many in attendance at the celebration likely don't know that this project is rooted in choices made more than 40 years ago when four separate, but connected, institutions made the decision to stay in a city that many others were abandoning for more economically promising locations across the county border. Our predecessors at Barnes Hospital, The Jewish Hospital of St. Louis, St. Louis Children's Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine all believed that they had the obligation, opportunity and privilege to not only provide world-class health services to members of the region, but also the responsibility to work to improve the community they would continue to call home. To be a catalyst in revitalization, they set their sights on working together to improve the three neighborhoods rimming their immediate campuses — the Central West End to the north, what is now known as Cortex to the east, and Forest Park Southeast to the south.

As the still relatively new president and chief executive officer of BJC HealthCare — the now “parent” of those three formerly independent hospitals and the health partner to the School of Medicine — I think it is important that we all understand the impact of these institutions on our region. Ribbon-cuttings certainly give us an opportunity to celebrate — not ourselves, but rather the impact of the choices we make and what those choices ultimately achieve.

The July 12 celebration means that approximately 50 families will live in beautiful homes in a neighborhood that is now considered one of the most desirable in the area, one that is diverse in terms of income, age and ethnicity. These families will have access to convenient public transportation; proximity to the largest employers in the region; be in walking distance to an elementary school and a community center; and only a short distance from grocery stores, restaurants, cultural institutions and farmers markets. It is a place where many want to live.

However, what is happening in Forest Park Southeast is not an overnight success story. It is a story of these health care institutions taking a long view, well knowing that the erosion once overtaking the neighborhood did not happen quickly and recognizing that improving the neighborhood would not happen quickly either. It took vision, conviction, political leadership and partnership with other nonprofit and for-profit organizations to get to the success that was celebrated on July 12.

As important as the health care services provided by BJC and others are, we know that achieving sustainable health in a community is also very much dependent on access to quality housing, education, jobs and grocery stores. And it is this knowledge that compels us to work with others to ensure we are helping to address these critical determinants of health.

The work is not over. Through the Washington University Medical Center Redevelopment Corp., whose members are BJC HealthCare and Washington University School of Medicine, we are focused on continued partnership to improve the city we call home. We are expanding our efforts and partnering with others to reach beyond the so-called Delmar Divide a mile to our north.

Because of their size, hospitals often serve as anchors in their communities. That is certainly true for many of the Missouri and Southern Illinois communities where BJC hospitals are rooted. We wear the anchor mantle with humility and will continue to honor the commitment of our predecessors by working to ensure our communities are places where all have the opportunity to thrive.

Richard Liekweg is president and chief executive officer of BJC HealthCare.