

## **AHERF Hurts AVH**

by

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Several years ago, regular, ordinary folks from Apollo approached Allegheny Valley Hospital (AVH) President Jack England and his fine staff with a critical need. We asked if they could build a clinic and add a doctor to our town. This was not a profitable proposition for AVH. Dollars and cents were factors in the equation but the bottom line for this non-profit hospital was providing service for their area community.

Jack and the Board of Directors could have ignored us. We were from a small town 30 minutes away. No one would have known if we were rejected and no one could have blamed AVH if they turned us down. But AVH stood tall as the epitome of an excellent community hospital and responded by bringing an important new facility to our area. Dr. Kupas is now my trusted doctor and the doctor for many others in our town. For some like me, AVH was no longer "that" hospital, it became "our" hospital.

I was later asked to serve on the Allegheny Valley Hospital Foundation (AVHF) Board, which in its own right was another remarkable achievement initiated by Jack England. The Foundation was charged with raising funds for the health care needs of the hospital and the AVH service area. I considered it a great honor to serve because I believed in the philosophy of the hospital, its responsiveness to the community and the quality service it delivered. AVHF became a first-class foundation for AVH.

Fifteen months ago, the AVH Board made the decision to merge with Allegheny Health Education and Research Foundation (AHERF). The reasons were good ones. Although financially solvent with some healthy reserves, it appeared that AVH did not have adequate reserves to absorb the impending medicare cuts over the next few years. AHERF was supposed to provide AVH with protection from the stormy sea. Instead, AHERF dragged "our" hospital into a sea of doubt.

It's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback. Hindsight is 20-20. No one wants to say it out loud but that sucking sound you now hear in the distance is coming from AVH which is being dragged into a sinking vortex by AHERF. In case you missed it, AHERF which acquired our hospital is in dire financial straits. During AHERF's misguided ego-stroking, empire building campaign, they forgot about something called fiscal responsibility. The word "implosion" was recently used by Governor Ridge in describing the financial condition of AHERF's network of hospitals. This is not good news for "our" hospital.

Recent newspaper articles have mentioned AHERF selling or closing hospitals including AVH. Whether or not these stories have any validity, the damage has been done. The perception of incompetence has tarnished the excellent reputation of "our" hospital. I don't care what propaganda spin AHERF is about to put on their financial condition, cuts

are imminent and you don't have to be an MBA to understand that quality care at our hospital could be compromised. Can we as a community allow this invaluable resource to be left dying in the emergency waiting room?

There are provisions for AVH's community advisory board to regain the hospital if AVH is either closed, put up for sale or if the nature of the hospital is changed. But I don't think we can afford to watch AVH and ultimately our community being bled to death before this happens.

Is there hope? Soon after news of the merger, we at AVHF decided we did not want our funds to be commingled with AHERF. Although none of us could project AHERF's current problems, we wanted all the money raised to stay within our region. That is precisely what is being done. To reinforce our independence we changed our name to the Allegheny Kiski Health Foundation (AKHF). Our hospital and the health care needs in the Allegheny and Kiski valleys were our only mission and continue to be our only mission. Regardless of what happens to AVH, I believe AKHF will emerge from the background as a health care force in the valley.

Perhaps there is a way for the AVH medical staff, the community advisory board, the foundation and the community to roll up their sleeves and come together with a plan. We must save "our" hospital.



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