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Parish-wide Healthcare Study Identifies Shortfalls, Needs and Potential Long-term Solution Options

RUSTON, La. - A comprehensive study of existing healthcare providers and services in Lincoln and nearby Parishes, designed to provide a strategic foundation for developing a long-term plan to address critical healthcare gaps in Lincoln Parish, was released today by the Lincoln Health Foundation.

Conducted by national healthcare consulting firm Whitecap Health Advisors, and funded by the Lincoln Health Foundation, the Lincoln Parish Police Jury and the City of Ruston, key study findings, based in part on a survey of residents, include:

- Economic growth in Lincoln Parish will attract a growing population for the foreseeable future, putting unique pressures on the demand for stable, quality, local healthcare.
- Across the country, rural healthcare systems face similar challenges, especially financial.
- Currently, more than 50% of Parish residents seeking inpatient care receive those services outside Lincoln Parish.
- The shortage of doctors in the Parish includes primary care, OB/GYN, general surgery, ophthalmology and psychiatry providers.
- Population and economic growth trends in Lincoln Parish indicate sufficient demand to support a local healthcare system that includes physician outpatient clinics, a cancer center, and an inpatient hospital.
- Partnerships and alternative funding will be key to developing and maintaining a comprehensive, financially viable healthcare system in the Parish. Reliance on providers outside the Parish for critical services will be essential for success.

Planning for Sustained Parish Growth

In 2023, an informal group of Ruston business and civic leaders recognized the need for a new, comprehensive plan to sustain the strong economic growth and development occurring in Lincoln Parish, according to group member Jay Guillot of Ruston.

Working under the name Empower Lincoln 20, the group sought to develop the framework of a plan that builds on the \$500 million invested in Ruston and the Parish during the last decade, and the additional \$700 million in new investments currently underway.

“We were reviewing the key factors that create and sustain sound economic growth, and developing a roadmap for continued Parish success,” Guillot said. “It quickly became apparent that a comprehensive healthcare system is critical to attracting and keeping businesses and families in any community, and Ruston and Lincoln Parish are no exception.”

The Whitecap Study

Whitecap, which specializes in community-based healthcare planning and financial feasibility analysis, was retained after a search and worked with the Lincoln Health Foundation to design a study that included public and healthcare provider outreach.

“Overseeing the development and conduct of this study fits our mission of improving health care access and outcomes for all residents of Lincoln Parish,” said Norman Hanes, Health Foundation CEO. “We built a healthcare committee representing public bodies, the healthcare profession, and local citizens, and worked closely with Whitecap to develop and implement the study.”

Public outreach involved interviewing 36 community members, including non-profit managers, government officials, physicians, healthcare educators, and community leaders, to gain insights and suggestions about the current healthcare landscape and needed improvements.

It also included a community-wide survey that elicited 2,053 responses and indicated a need for significant improvements in local healthcare facilities and services, including a new hospital, and development of one or more partnerships with a regional healthcare provider to grow services within Lincoln Parish.

“Lincoln Parish is held in high regard throughout the region and state,” said Glenn Scriber, president of the Lincoln Parish Police Jury. “This study exemplifies our commitment to our citizens by recognizing that quality healthcare has a stabilizing effect on our great community and is a must for continued growth.”

Whitecap identified the potential service area for an improved healthcare system as Lincoln, Bienville, Claiborne, Jackson and Union Parishes. Under an enhanced system, their model anticipates greater Lincoln Parish patient retention, and a higher draw from surrounding parishes, as historically has been the case.

The study indicates that Lincoln Parish could support outpatient clinics with a total of 40 to 60 exam rooms, a cancer center with up to eight infusion chairs, an inpatient hospital with 70 rooms and 19 emergency beds, and a surgical platform of five operating rooms overall.

Preliminary, high-level cost projections for such facilities suggest a range of \$50M - \$80 million for a medical office building to house physician outpatient clinics, approximately \$11 million for

a cancer center, and approximately \$2 - \$2.5 million per inpatient hospital bed, in today's dollars and depending on specific needs, choices and details, according to the study.

“We believe Whitecap has done an excellent job of accurately assessing the current state of healthcare services in Lincoln Parish, identifying needed improvements, and developing an initial estimate of what those improvements might cost,” Hanes said.

Ruston Mayor Ronny Walker agreed, and further noted that “an important part of a thriving community is a multifaceted healthcare system. This study gives us a roadmap of how to achieve this goal within our city and parish.”

Matt Cox, a partner at Whitecap, said he was very impressed with the level of collaboration and community input the Whitecap team received in Ruston and Lincoln Parish.

“From public officials, healthcare professionals, business leaders and local residents, the level of input and involvement was tremendous, and the result is a solid foundation on which to begin building the high quality healthcare system Ruston and Lincoln Parish deserve,” Cox said.

Next Steps and Timeline

Building on the healthcare study results, the Lincoln Health Foundation and its public partners, the City of Ruston and the Lincoln Parish Police Jury, will continue to further refine local healthcare priorities, evaluate potential partnership options, and explore sustainable funding strategies that help expand local access to basic care and support major healthcare facility improvements for the community.

Hanes said the next step is to engage more deeply with potential regional and state healthcare providers and develop a detailed understanding of their interest in partnering to help fund and meet the immediate and long-term healthcare needs of the Parish. He said periodic updates will be provided to the public, and that planning and partnership development will continue throughout 2026.

Study Summary Available

A detailed summary of the Healthcare Study Final Report is available on the Lincoln Health Foundation website at www.lincolnhealth.com/study.