

Presentation: The Faces of Rural Hospital Closures

In today's talk, we'll discuss two recent rural hospital closures in Texas covered by the *Texas Observer*. One of them was in North Texas, the other in the Hill Country. I did not report on former, the 2015 closure of Bowie Memorial Hospital in Montague County. Still, the magazine's coverage of the closure ("The Doctor is Out," April 2016) appears to be comprehensive; I'll answer questions about the reporting to the best of my ability and make a note of questions I'm unable to answer. I have reported on the other closure I'll discuss today, that of Rockdale Hospital in Milam County ("How Can You Do This to People?: After Rural Hospitals Close in Milam County, Residents Scramble to Find Care," December 2018). As with the Bowie closure, I'll answer questions about this story to the best of my ability.

I'll attempt to keep my portion of this presentation brief — I'd like to allow as much time as possible for questions and conversation. A brief note before I briefly outline the closures below: The closure of rural hospitals in Texas represents a critical problem for the people who call rural communities home. Access to adequate healthcare is just as important as safe drinking water, good schools and all the other fundamental services Texans rely on. Without access to reliable and affordable healthcare, I think it's safe to assume that rural Texans will get sicker and that some will prematurely succumb to health problems, whether those problems are of an emergency or chronic nature.

The plight of rural hospitals, which appear to be under extreme financial pressure for a variety of reasons, is one that the general public ought to be paying attention to. Of course, it's sometimes difficult to wrangle the public's attention to the most important issues. One tool we use in journalism — and one that I'd encourage y'all to start using more, too — is the personal anecdote. The public is loathe to read a story about some stuffy financial report, but they'll probably tune into a tale about how a sick person just lost their doctor because of a hospital closure. People care about other people. And people are more likely to care about the sordid state of Texas' rural hospitals if they see how it affects their fellow Texas — or how it could affect them someday, too.

Case study No. 1: Bowie Memorial Hospital

- Closed November 2015
- Residents refused to keep the hospital open by approving a hospital district
- Quote: "You can't thrive in a town without a hospital."

Case Study No. 2: Rockdale Hospital

- Closed December 2018
- Closure followed economic downturns in Milam County
- Quote: "People depend on the hospital. How can you do this to people?"