

The Rural Engagement Program is committed to improving health care access for rural Texans, ensuring quality care reaches every community, regardless of location or resources.

Ochiltree General Hospital: Committed to Providing Comprehensive Health Care

Perryton, TX—about as far north as you can get and still be in the Lone Star State—is located in the Panhandle, roughly two hours northeast of Amarillo. In fact, it's closer to Oklahoma's capital than to Austin. Surrounded by wheat fields and wide ranch lands, Perryton is a close-knit community that values its local businesses and deep-rooted traditions.

Despite its small size, Perryton boasts several notable current and former residents including: "Hank the Cowdog", the beloved fictional character created by award-winning author John Erickson; Michael Hargrove, a former professional baseball player and manager and Angela Arenivar, featured in the Oscar-nominated documentary *Spellbound*, which followed top contestants of the National Spelling Bee.

Residents of Perryton enjoy slightly milder summers than those farther south in Texas and typically receive one to two inches of snow each winter. However, they are not immune to severe weather; a devastating EF-3 tornado struck the community two years ago. During that crisis, Ochiltree General Hospital (OGH) was a critical lifeline—remaining fully operational and triaging a significant number of patients.

Founded in 1967, OGH has long been a pillar of the North Plains for over half a century. More than a healthcare facility, it is a reflection of the community it serves. Perryton native Debbie Beck was born at OGH and has worked there for 34 years—starting as a filing clerk, later serving as HR Director and now as CFO. She takes pride in the hospital's commitment to the residents of Perryton which is reflected in the many employees who actively volunteer and give back to the community. Beck also appreciates the leadership of OGH's CEO, Kelly Judice, MSHA, BSN.

Judice moved back to Perryton 28 years ago and served in several areas at OGH before assuming the position of CEO in 2023. Similar to Beck, she is equally passionate about the community and the hospital's mission.

"I love my job, the people I work with, and the communities we serve," Judice said. "Our patients are our top priority. We're always looking for ways to grow and meet our community's evolving needs."

In keeping with their commitment to innovation and service, Judice and Beck reached out to the Texas A&M Health Rural Engagement Program for support in strengthening health care services for Perryton and surrounding communities. The Rural Engagement Program is a statewide initiative led by professionals from the Texas A&M Rural & Community Health Institute (RCHI), the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing, and Pharmacy, and the Telehealth Institute. Its mission is to improve access and strengthen health care systems for rural Texans.

Angie Wilson, a Technical Assistant Coordinator with RCHI, met with the OGH leadership team for a collaborative discussion centered on the hospital's successes, challenges and future goals. They explored the resources available through the Rural Engagement Program and together they identified three priority focus areas:

1. **Promoting the new Perryton Health Center**, a state-of-the-art family medical clinic, including video spotlights on hospital services and providers *Click to view video*
2. **Optimizing OGH's Swing Bed Program** *(see shaded area below)*
3. **Streamlining clinic operations** to merge two health clinics into one unified facility

The following Program partners provided consultative and professional services to achieve these goals:

- Barbara C. Carey, president of *TCI – The Communication Institute*, provided marketing and promotional support. This included a press release, social media content, bilingual radio ads, brochures, and nine promotional videos highlighting OGH service lines.
- Stephen Leone, a licensed physical therapist and CEO of *Leone Rehab Resources*, supported swing bed program optimization, staff education, referral development, and therapy staffing.
- Katie Baker, a senior manager with *PYA, P.C.*, conducted a thorough review of operational processes and then provided Ochiltree with a specific strategy to optimize clinic operations for the new facility

All three initiatives were fully funded by the Rural Engagement Program.

Both Beck and Judice are pleased with the outcome of these projects and can already see noticeable improvements in each of the three focus areas.

“Our Swing Bed Program has benefitted from working with Angie and Stephen Leone,” Beck said. “We have had some great marketing materials come out of the partnership, and we’re working on improving our Rural Health Clinic that recently merged from two separate clinics into one mega clinic.”

Because of the partnership with the Rural Engagement Program, OGH is better able to serve its residents with exceptional health care.

“Our goal is to continue providing care to the citizens of Perryton and the surrounding areas,” said Beck. “We want OGH to be the first place our residents turn to for care—and ideally, to keep them close to home for as long as medically possible.”

The Swing Bed Program:

Utilizes valuable resources—hospital beds are used for two categories of care instead of just one; hence, the beds can “swing” from being used for emergency care (acute care) to being used for skilled nursing/rehabilitative care (post-acute care)

Can provide increased revenue from an additional service line

Can be cost-efficient—allows rural hospitals to care for patients locally instead of transferring them to larger, distant facilities thereby reducing transportation costs

Can improve patient care—patients will receive a higher level of care from being in a hospital during their rehabilitation; and patients are close to home so friends and family can offer support during their recovery