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WMC's EmPATH unit improving emergency mental health care

By MICKEY POWELL The Winchester Star
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Winchester Medical Center's EmPATH unit is making it quicker and calmer for patients to receive emergency mental health care, according to hospital officials.

EmPATH is an acronym for Emergency Psychiatric Assessment, Treatment and Healing. People needing immediate care for behavioral or emotional crises can go there at any time of the day or night.

The unit, which was the first of its kind in Virginia, has treated approximately 1,660 patients since it opened in October 2024 at the hospital on Amherst Street, according to psychiatrist Dr. Louis Nardelli.

He commented during the Valley Health System Corporation's semiannual meeting at the hospital's conference center on Tuesday.

Previously, all psychiatric patients — whether they came to the hospital on their own, in an ambulance or in the custody of a police officer — were directed to the Emergency Department.

But "ERs tend to be loud and semi-chaotic," Nardelli said, adding that can overwhelm a patient in crisis.

EmPATH works closely with the Emergency Department, he said.

Yet it provides care in a calmer environment, one designed to deescalate tensions. For example, Nardelli said, patients are treated within an "open milieu" rather than isolated rooms. Instead of lying on stretchers, patients relax in recliners.

Patients are typically evaluated within a half-hour of their arrival, he said. Their average stays at EmPATH are 6-8 hours, he said, and many are discharged with care plans or referrals for outpatient services elsewhere instead of being hospitalized.

Furthermore, "someone is always engaging with the patient," said Nardelli, rather than the person having to wait extended periods to see professional caregivers.

EmPATH was developed in 2012 by Dr. Scott Zeller, then director of psychiatric emergency services for Alameda Health System in Oakland, California. According to online information, Zeller had become frustrated with the challenges of treating patients undergoing mental health crises within the emergency department.

Reducing the stigma of receiving mental health care, EmPATH is "making great changes to individuals' lives," Nardelli said.

In addition, it lets doctors and their associates in the psychiatric field provide care they were trained to give more easily, resulting in better job satisfaction, Nardelli told hospital executives, board members and others at the corporation meeting.

Also during the meeting, the 10th anniversary of the hospital's Cancer Center was observed.

The nationally accredited facility, which opened in 2016 at 400 Campus Blvd., provides comprehensive oncology services, including medical, radiation and surgical treatments, as well as support services.

It treated more than 2,000 patients last year alone, said Dr. Devin Flaherty, a surgical oncologist and president of medical staff affairs and the staff executive committee.

Patients "do have the opportunity to go elsewhere" for care, Flaherty pointed out, "... but they want to stay close to home."

The Cancer Center provides the same level of care as similar facilities at hospitals in larger metropolitan areas, such as the UVA Health University Medical Center in Charlottesville and the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, he said.

Flaherty mentioned that the Cancer Center is at the forefront of using the latest technology and treatments, including robotic surgeries, targeted treatments and immunotherapies.

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