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Incoming NCH Healthcare System CEO starts networking in community

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Paul Hiltz sees a bright future for the NCH Healthcare System.

Ahead of his official start date Sept. 3 as president and CEO of NCH, Hiltz was at the Downtown Baker Hospital on Thursday to meet employees and the medical staff.



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He favors community hospitals, recognizes patients come first and believes quality care is possible because of physicians as key partners.

"It is our intention to make this a great place to practice medicine, a great place to work if you are a nurse, other clinician or a support person and a great place to be a patient," Hiltz, 60, said. "When you put the patient first, it seems like things tend to work out pretty well."

He emphasized that health care of the future is not going to be confined within four walls of a hospital. Helping a community become healthier means delivering preventive care to where people live, he said.

Hiltz was first introduced to the NCH workforce July 26 through a video following an announcement of his appointment as the new CEO. He comes to Naples from Ohio with more than 25 years of experience in hospitals and related fields.

Hiltz will spend his first 90 days on a listening tour with employees yet said listening is key to his leadership style.

More: [Five things to know about NCH Healthcare System's new CEO Paul Hiltz](#)

[\(/story/news/health/2019/07/26/five-things-know-nchs-new-ceo/1837270001/\)](#)

In case you missed it: [Three SWFL hospitals make list of best hospitals in the state](#) [\(/story/news/health/2019/07/30/u-s-news-world-report-three-southwest-florida-hospitals-make-list-best-in-state/1858379001/\)](#)



Chief nursing officer Jon Kling, left, gives a tour to Paul Hiltz, the new CEO of NCH, center, and Kris Hiltz, right, at NCH Baker Hospital Downtown in Naples on Thursday, August 1, 2019. (Photo: Alex Driehaus/Naples Daily News USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

"Collaboration has been a hallmark of my career," Hiltz said. "We need to be connected to each other within the health system and to our partners outside, and that connectedness will make us a stronger provider."

NCH is a major employer in Southwest Florida with 5,000 employees and 730 physicians. It has two hospital campuses with a combined 716 beds and numerous outpatient locations. The system reported \$632 million in revenue last year.

Jon Kling, NCH's chief nursing officer, said he has a good first impression.

"Today is a good day," he said. "He supports nurses and the value of the work that nurses do bedside and in the community."

The two NCH hospitals have slipped in ratings by the national Leapfrog Group for safety and quality. Hiltz vows to get that changed to top ratings. The same goes for ratings from the federal government.

The NCH board of trustees stuck to its timeline to name a new CEO by late July. A national search began in April with the executive search firm Russell Reynolds Associates.

NCH trustees formed an internal search committee that included medical staff and community representatives. A candidate profile was developed.

Hiltz was among 11 candidates considered after vetting from a pool of more than 100 applicants. He was one of two finalists and was chosen by a unanimous vote of the NCH board.

Beyond a requirement of delivering quality medical care and staying abreast of challenges in the hospital industry, the candidate profile spoke to the discord that began last summer and escalated under former CEO, Dr. Allen Weiss. He resigned Jan. 23.

Previous coverage:

- [NCH Healthcare System hires executive search firm to find new CEO \(/story/news/health/2019/03/05/nch-retains-search-firm-find-new-ceo-but-no-timeline-disclosed/3055188002/\)](/story/news/health/2019/03/05/nch-retains-search-firm-find-new-ceo-but-no-timeline-disclosed/3055188002/)
- [Search for new CEO of NCH Healthcare System faces criticism for lack of transparency \(/story/news/health/2019/05/25/nch-keeping-community-dark-civic-watchdogs-say/3751271002/\)](/story/news/health/2019/05/25/nch-keeping-community-dark-civic-watchdogs-say/3751271002/)
- [Search for new CEO of NCH Healthcare System has some questioning the process \(/story/news/health/2019/04/05/search-for-new-ceo-of-nch-healthcare-system-has-some-questioning-the-process/3376651002/\)](/story/news/health/2019/04/05/search-for-new-ceo-of-nch-healthcare-system-has-some-questioning-the-process/3376651002/)

The new CEO must have a “deep understanding of employed, independent and affiliated physicians” and create greater cohesion and partnerships with all groups.”

Hiltz’s record of results exemplifies what NCH stands for, said Michael Wynn, a longtime community leader who serves on the NCH board of trustees. Wynn served on the search committee.

“When he talks about community, he means it,” Wynn said in a news release. “His commitment to physician engagement and collaborative culture will bring a new energy to our hospital system that will make us stronger.”

Despite months of outcry from residents, long-time philanthropists and independent physicians, Weiss did not back down from a pilot project on select hospital floors where employed hospitalists were in charge of admissions and patient care.

Independent physicians feared the end goal was an employed physician model. Weiss’ resignation came on the heels of an unprecedented “no confidence” vote by the medical staff. He had served as CEO since 2006.

Hiltz recognizes he needs to build bridges with the philanthropic community and with the medical staff.

“It is a great time to turn the page,” he said. “We all want this to be a great health care system because it is important to everyone who lives here, myself included.”

The hospitalist pilot project has been resolved, he said.

“We have a pluralistic model of medical staff so doctors can follow their patients, and hospitalists can be involved as well,” he said. “It’s not a question of ‘either or’ it is ‘both and.’”

Hiltz currently is president and CEO of Mercy Medical Center in Canton, Ohio, a 476-bed hospital that is owned by Sisters of Charity Health System in Cleveland.

He started at Mercy Medical in July 2017 as interim CEO and was appointed to the position permanently in 2018.

Before his move to the Canton hospital, he was a senior executive with Mercy Health System in Cincinnati, which is not related to Sisters of Charity Health System.

He served in multiple capacities at Mercy Health, including as president and CEO of Mercy Hospital-Mt. Airy and as president and CEO of the Springfield, Ohio, region.

Several community leaders are optimistic a dark chapter in NCH’s history will soon be a distant memory.

James McGraw, a part-time resident of Naples and current board chairman of the Cincinnati region for what’s now Bon Secours Mercy Health, has known Hiltz for years.

McGraw said he did not recommend Hiltz to the NCH board or the search firm but wishes he did. He had no idea Hiltz was considering a change.

“Knowing something about what happened (in Naples), I’m really excited about Paul Hiltz,” McGraw said. “His style, his inclusivity, his transparency is exactly what we need at NCH. He has no ego. He is just a very practical good man.”

In the video to employees and available to the public, Hiltz said NCH will remain a community hospital and he spoke of the importance of working collaboratively.

More: [Community readies to move on after NCH Healthcare resignations \(/story/news/health/2019/01/24/phil-dutcher-interim-ceo-starts-new-role-nch-weiss-says-farewell/2668597002/\)](https://www.enr.com/story/news/health/2019/01/24/phil-dutcher-interim-ceo-starts-new-role-nch-weiss-says-farewell/2668597002/)

"He was extremely popular in Springfield, Ohio," McGraw said. "He was the main CEO in that town and he was loved."

He was credited for leading a revitalization effort of downtown Springfield.

Hiltz said it's been important throughout his career to be involved in local initiatives. He and his wife, Kristen, have four grown children.

He was born and raised in northern Kentucky and the greater Cincinnati area. He earned a master's degree in health administration from Xavier University in Cincinnati.

He won the 2017 Distinguished Alumni Service Award from the Xavier Graduate Program in Health Administration.

McGraw has no doubts Hiltz is the right fit for NCH and will restore NCH's relationships within the community. Major donors to the hospital system had withdrawn support and a key fundraiser ball was cancelled during the fallout over the hospitalist project.

"The community needs to re-embrace NCH; it is very important to the benefactors, the community, the governance and the doctors," McGraw said. "I'm very excited about his ability to get that done very quickly. As challenging as things are right now, I really feel good about what this guy brings."

Edward Morton, who stepped down as CEO of NCH in 2006, said he has not met or spoken with Hiltz, but feedback from physicians and others has been favorable.

Hiltz is described as open-minded, objective, fair, inclusive and a very good listener, Morton said.

"You start to get a pretty good picture of the individual," Morton said. "I get a sense this gentleman wants to be all inclusive, which is a valuable attribute."

Physicians who are independent are advocates for their patients to hospital administration and that role is critical, Morton said.



Paul Hiltz, the new CEO of NCH, takes a tour of NCH Baker Hospital Downtown in Naples on Thursday, August 1, 2019. (Photo: Alex Driehaus/Naples Daily News USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

"He seems to understand that and has a willingness to embrace other local charities," Morton said. "You don't operate a community hospital solely on financial terms."

Another controversy involved Neighborhood Health Clinic which provides a medical home to uninsured working residents of Collier County. The clinic operates with volunteer physicians and nurses.

Historically Neighborhood Clinic and NCH had a relationship but that ended in April 2018.

Physicians employed by the hospital system or under contract were told to stop volunteering at the clinic. NCH refuted what occurred, yet the issue further inflamed the community's calls for Weiss' resignation.

Neighborhood founder Nancy Lascheid said she is looking forward to working with Hiltz.

"As a member of our community's health care safety net for low income workers, we welcome Paul Hiltz and his vast experience of community involvement and support," Lascheid said.

Phil Dutcher, who was appointed interim CEO, restored NCH's relationship with the clinic.

Dutcher will return to his prior position as chief operating officer despite being a candidate for the top job. He told employees last week he supported the board's decision to appoint Hiltz. Dutcher reiterated Thursday his intentions of staying.

Morton said there's been progress toward healing wounds with physicians, hospital donors and other charitable groups under Dutcher's watch.

"I think NCH has made a lot of progress but like anything, it has to be a sustained effort," he said.

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