

HSC's Ricci faces tough healthcare environment after year of major successes

By John Stearns

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Hospital for Special Care (HSC) chief executive Lynn Ricci knows the hospital was handed a valuable gift — financially and image-wise — in August as a beneficiary of funds raised through the Travelers Championship golf tournament.

New Britain-based HSC received more than \$300,000 to apply toward researching amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, which took the life of Travelers Executive Chairman Jay Fishman shortly after the tournament, and hiring more ALS clinicians.

"This Travelers exposure for us was so extraordinary," Ricci said, anticipating to capitalize on that in 2017 and beyond. "It raised the bar for the team and we need to stay in front of that. I think for us to leverage those experiences is going to be very important."

The attention the tournament gave HSC follows other recognition for its outpatient and inpatient program for autistic youth, including becoming the nation's first Patient-Centered Specialty Practice and one of 10 U.S. inpatient units offering inter-disciplinary treatment.

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"We have a lot of successes to celebrate and we're probably at the best point we've ever been in the history of the hospital in terms of being known outside of the New Britain community, but we can't stop," Ricci said. "We have to really leverage that because that's going to bring us philanthropy, it's going to bring us grants, it's going to continue to bring us really great employees."

It's a pivotal time for Ricci, 57, who succeeded Dr. John Votto as president and CEO of HSC on Oct. 1, 2015, and added the additional role of president

and CEO of HSC's parent, Center of Special Care Inc., also held by Votto, on Oct. 1, 2016. While new as CEO, Ricci — who lives in Killingworth, is married and has two adult children — has been with HSC since 2004, most recently as chief operating officer.

She oversees HSC, a therapeutic riding program with 10 horses in Middletown and a satellite hospital program within St. Francis Hospital & Medical Center's north campus. About 1,100 employees treat patients in areas including pulmonary, acquired brain injury, neuromuscular, spinal cord, autism, cardiac and complex pediatric care

Roughly 75 percent of HSC's patients are on Medicaid, presenting financial challenges. HSC is entering its 10th year without an increase in Medicaid reimbursements, while patient loads and operating costs rise. There's talk nationally of converting Medicaid to block grants, which could mean states losing some federal matching dollars, Ricci said.

With HSC's heavy reliance on Medicaid, "it makes us certainly more vulnerable," she said.

That's why HSC tries to avoid overlapping other hospitals. Its autism program, for example, attracts patients from throughout Connecticut. HSC also serves about 250 of the state's 300 ALS patients.

HSC plans to build a new, specially designed 12-bed autism inpatient unit that would replace the eight-bed unit in converted space, but fundraising for that is probably a couple years off, Ricci said.

More immediately, HSC is hiring a second Parkinson's disease doctor in early 2017 to reduce the months-long wait for new patients to see the current specialist. The Parkinson's program,

like others at HSC, is attractive for its continuum of care, Ricci said.

HSC also is challenged in receiving patients discharged more quickly from acute-care hospitals who are sicker and demand more services as payers seek shorter stays or home care to lower costs, she said.

Ricci calls HSC a safety net for the state, caring for patients who would have nowhere else to go. While state Medicaid payments are flat, Connecticut has provided other valuable support, including for the inpatient autism unit and electronic medical records system, she said.

The fiscal environment requires careful management to protect bedside care.

Votto, who stepped down after 19 years as HSC CEO, said Ricci is suited to the challenge. HSC's employee culture has been important to its success and he said Ricci understands the culture, is energetic, collaborative, personable and smart.

Her challenge is retaining those positive forces amid uncertainties surrounding U.S. healthcare policy and reimbursements.

"Obviously, it gets harder and harder when the finances are cut," Votto said, stressing HSC's focus on efficiency, multitasking and nimbleness.

"I think she's going to be successful and the hospital's going to continue to be successful," Votto said. "You can't sit on your laurels. I think you've got to work at it every day."

That includes looking for new opportunities, such as potentially consulting other autism programs nationally, something Ricci could begin in 2017.

"It's a challenging environment," Ricci said, but there's potential in exporting some of HSC's talents. ☐



