

Community Medical Centers to partner with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals

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Community Medical Centers announced Wednesday it is joining with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals to expand specialty services for children in Fresno.

The agreement places Community in more head-to-head competition with Valley Children's Hospital in Madera County.

Community has had an agreement for 40 years with the University of California at San Francisco-Fresno Medical Education Program, and the two have collaborated to run a pediatric residency program. Under the new agreement with UCSF Benioff Hospitals, the range of pediatric residency services will be expanded in downtown Fresno, Community said.

About 300 UCSF-Fresno medical residents and fellows currently train at Community Regional Medical Center in 25 specialties.

The pediatric program at Community Regional Medical Center will be affiliated with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals in San Francisco and Oakland.

The collaboration between UCSF and Community Regional comes as Valley Children's severed ties earlier this year with UCSF-Fresno and announced it would create its own pediatric residency and pediatric fellowship program in collaboration with Stanford University School of Medicine.

Under the agreement between Community Regional and UCSF, outpatient pediatric specialty practices at Community Regional will be expanded and more subspecialty pediatric doctors will be recruited to be part of the UCSF faculty in Fresno. UCSF will help Community develop an inpatient pediatric intensive care unit and will assist in the design of an expanded inpatient pediatric medical surgical unit, said Craig Wagoner, CEO at Community Regional Medical Center.

UCSF Benioff Hospitals will provide subspecialty doctors from San Francisco and Oakland campuses when needed, and the out-of-town doctors will work with local doctors on complicated pediatric cases. UCSF will start a telehealth service that will allow Fresno physicians access to video consultation with UCSF pediatric subspecialists.

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Craig Wagoner

"Today we are making history with our expanded relationship," Wagoner said Wednesday at an employee meeting at the UCSF-Fresno education building at Fresno and Divisadero streets.

The UCSF collaboration better positions Community to capture more of the children's health-care market in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Also on Wednesday, Community executives said Community Regional has been discussing a women's and children's hospital inside a proposed new patient tower.

The new 350-bed tower would cost \$500 to \$600 million and "in concept includes a women's and children's hospital,"

said Tim Joslin, president and CEO of Community Medical Centers, which operates Community Regional, Clovis Community Medical Center and Fresno Heart & Surgical Hospital. Development of the tower could start in two to three years, Joslin said.

Community already has plans to build an 180,000-square-foot medical office complex and a parking garage in downtown Fresno that will house pediatricians, pediatric specialists and other doctors. That building could be open two years from now.

Community Regional's efforts to expand pediatric services have been stoked by an ongoing rift between the downtown Fresno hospital and Valley Children's over who will care for the region's smallest patients. The two hospitals publicly squared off last fall. Valley Children's then accused Community Regional of building a pediatric specialty network. Community denied it and accused Valley Children's of an unwillingness to see patients in a contract dispute with Santé Community Physicians, a doctors group affiliated with Community Medical Centers.

This summer, Community Regional added a second pediatric surgeon, which gave it the ability to do operations on preemies and newborns in its intensive care unit. Until then, Valley Children's Hospital had been the only place for neonatal surgeries in the central San Joaquin Valley.

The addition of UCSF specialists could encroach further on Valley Children's turf. On Wednesday, Scott J. Soifer, professor and vice chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at the Benioff hospital in San Francisco, said UCSF and Community have recruited a pediatric cardiologist, three pulmonary pediatric specialists and a gastroenterologist. The goal is to have 10 to 15 pediatric specialists – to start with – in Fresno, he said.

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Dr. Stephen Wilson

Dr. Stephen Wilson, chief medical officer at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in San Francisco, said the recruitment of pediatric specialists to Fresno is integral to the collaboration between UCSF and Community Regional. It's evident that the region needs more doctors for children, he said. "This is not about competing and putting up walls."

In a written statement Wednesday, Todd Suntrapak, Valley Children's president and CEO, reiterated the hospital's role in the Valley.

"Valley Children's has been dedicated to providing excellent care for kids for more than 60 years and will continue to focus on its mission to improve the health and well-being of children throughout Central California. Nothing can diminish Valley Children's position as the premier provider of pediatric specialty care from Stockton to Bakersfield and to the Central Coast," he said.

Suntrapak said Valley Children's "continues to add services here locally to care for the most complex cases; to increase access for families in our 11-county service area; and to expand our partnerships with Stanford Children's Health, Stanford University School of Medicine and hospitals and medical groups throughout Central California."

As the UCSF collaboration with Community Regional develops, it will include UCSF specialists based in the Bay Area offering clinics in Fresno, Wilson said. The specialists could see children here a couple of times a month. The specialists also will be available for consultations with the Fresno specialists at all times, he said.

The plan is to minimize patients having to travel out of the area for care, he said.

As Wilson sees it, the Valley will benefit from Community Regional's partnership with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals. Children in the Bay Area have access to five times the pediatric specialists as the children in the Valley, he said. "We really believe this is going to be good because it will broaden the available options."

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