

New Southampton Hospital Administrator Embraces Challenges of South Fork Care With Eye on a Bright Future

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Michael Wright on Aug 21, 2024



For Stony Brook Southampton Hospital's new chief administrator, Emily Mastaler, the shift from working in a rural, remote hospital system near the Canadian border, to the South Fork of Long Island, with its mind boggling array of diversities, personalities and logistical challenges is a learning experience that she is still just beginning to get her arms around eight weeks into the job.

Mastaler, who grew up in Vermont and spent most of her career there working as a clinical psychologist, came to Southampton earlier this summer from River Hospital, a tiny 25-bed critical care hospital that served as the only health care center for a broad and remote region along the St. Lawrence Seaway north of Syracuse.

With her husband, Jon McAuliffe, and their already locally famous English bulldog, Boom Boom, Mastaler moved to Southampton Village earlier this summer and said she has spent much of her first months on the job embedding with various units at the facility and attending "listening sessions" with a broad range of community groups and organizations to help build her understanding of the complex diversity in the communities that the hospital serves.

"It's a huge footprint — which is awesome," Mastaler, 43, said. "There's a lot to get acquainted with. The needs in Hampton Bays are not the same as out in Montauk, and I want to make sure I get a chance to connect with all of it so that as we decide our next phase of our health care strategy, it is really inclusive."

Before taking over as the CEO of River Hospital, she had spent six years as the chief operating officer of a large community health organization with 19 facilities spread across several Vermont counties, where she had learned the challenges of turning the sort of outreach and life-based care that mental health relies on into actionable policies for administrators running health care networks.

That integration, which she calls the health care “ecosystem,” is the cornerstone of her vision for how she will advance Stony Brook Southampton Hospital and its satellites’ role in health care on the South Fork in the coming years.

“It’s about thinking of health care in relationship to the lived experiences of those in our communities,” she said. “The top priority has to be access — making sure that people can get the services that they need. There are many barriers ... transportation, child care, access to health insurance, and we have to look at the whole health experience of our patients. Can they get to us, do we have service hours that allow people to get to appointments beyond their daily work hours. Child care and family dynamics can be a barrier. Sometimes we have to bring health care closer to our patients to make sure people can get the services they need.

“I’ve always kept that clinical heart and the focus on access to care, the belief that growing the overall well-being of a community and making sure that we build a strong ecosystem of health care informs everything I do,” she added.

The decision by the hospital to construct a new standalone emergency room in East Hampton is illustrative of the types of things hospital systems like Stony Brook Southampton Hospital and the broader Stony Brook Medicine network need to do to improve the “ecosystem” of health care for their communities and patients, Mastaler said.

The East Hampton satellite emergency department is on track to be completed by the end of October. After jumping through the hoops of numerous medical certifications, the hospital expects to have the facility up and running by April 2025.

“It’s all about access to care and making sure our services are where they need to be, and the East Hampton ED is going to be a huge part of that,” she said. “It’s going to be so important to people in that community.”

Staff who live in the eastern hamlets have already volunteered to shift to working at that facility, Mastaler said, easing some of the challenges in staffing the new facility in a world where some employees already commute for hours to get to the Southampton hospital and its satellites.

Staffing has been a mountainous challenge for the hospital in recent years with out-of-control housing costs and traffic congestion throwing up hurdles to recruiting doctors, nurses and all manner of support staff, but Mastaler said that she has found the Southampton hospital and its 1,400 employees across its many regional facilities to be on almost shockingly sound footing, considering the challenges, that she says speaks to it being, quite simply, a nice place to work in the grand scheme.

“This place has an incredible culture that is unified and supportive of one another, very close knit and extremely welcoming,” she said. “I think that’s what attracts people here and why they stay. I met someone recently that’s been here for 39 or 40 years.

“I’ve spoken to people who can have a two- or three-hour commute, one way to get to work. When you talk about the culture of the workplace, that is empirical evidence to support people’s belief in the place. That’s something we need to hold on to and cultivate because that is not always the case in the industry.”

The pandemic was a learning experience for the entire health care industry that opened professional caregivers’ eyes to both what they could do better and what they do well, Mastaler says, and treatment of staff was at the top of the list.

“We learned a lot about our staff and what it means to be on the front line. It was intense and there were a lot of lessons learned — making sure we have solid resources for the them to be taken care of and supported, cutting-edge technology and removing barriers to making work easier, because it is, inherently, incredibly hard,” she said.

“It also taught us that we have to be adaptable and flexible and I think we demonstrated that we are one of the most adaptable and flexible industries there is,” she said. “Standing up vaccine clinics and testing sites, pivoting to move ICU and bed capacity almost overnight, what our pharmacies did in terms of capacity. We found out that is one of our superpowers.”

And building on that new understanding of what is needed in the always rapidly changing world of health care must be built into the system at Stony Brook Southampton Hospital and its satellite facilities is critical to the future of the health care “ecosystem” the hospital anchors on the South Fork.

“Health care changes extremely quickly — new innovations are constantly changing the way we support people and we have to stay current in that world,” she said. “We have to be agile.”