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A Partnership of Opportunity: Gundersen and Bellin CEOs Discuss Joining Forces to Serve Wisconsin Communities

At a *Wisconsin Health News* luncheon on Aug. 2 in Madison, Gundersen Health System CEO Dr. Scott Rathgaber and Bellin Health System CEO Chris Woleske discussed the health systems' merger, first announced in June, which will create a combined \$2.5 billion health system with more than 14,000 employees at 11 hospitals and more than 100 clinics across Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.



Tim Stumm, Chris Woleske and Dr. Scott Rathgaber

Moderated by Tim Stumm of *Wisconsin Health News*, the discussion began by highlighting how the merger came about. Rathgaber and Woleske cited the organizations' history of working together, including in partnerships that predated the two in their roles as CEOs, and indicated the merger evolved from those partnerships. Rathgaber shared that Bellin and Gundersen are "like-minded," and Woleske added that the two organizations partner around a common philosophical tenet - the Triple Aim of care, health and cost. When asked about the role finances played in the decision for a merger, Woleske said, "Thankfully we're approaching this at a time when both of our organizations are strong. So we look at this as a partnership of opportunity, not one of necessity."

The merger agreement was signed last week and the next step is moving onto regulatory filings and integration planning. Rathgaber emphasized that with a parent company that will oversee the new organization, the leaders will be working closely together with Rathgaber serving as the CEO President and Woleske as the Executive Vice President of the new parent company.

Throughout the discussion, both leaders emphasized their beliefs in care closer to home, in partnerships, and in high-quality affordable care. When asked about how they will maintain an emphasis on affordability, Woleske replied, "We know that high quality actually lowers costs. So that's going to be our focus. And there's research that shows that that approach actually does bring

cost down.”

Woleske and Rathgaber indicated they intend to maintain relationships with partners who help them to serve their mission, but that how they will fit into the merger remains to be seen. This includes Gundersen Health System’s relationship with Quartz Health Plan and the partnership Bellin has with Health Partners’ Robyn product. Rathgaber indicated that both have been meeting the needs of their communities. “We don’t have any designs on what’s going to happen between those except to say that all of our partnerships that we currently have, as long as they serve our mission, we welcome continuing all of them,” Rathgaber said. Woleske added that Bellin’s new partnership with Children’s and ThedaCare to provide pediatric care closer to home is off to a great start, and they want to be able to continue that.

According to the two leaders, the merger is not about growing for the sake of growing. “We aren’t looking to downsize,” said Rathgaber. “We are looking to grow. We grow not just because we want to grow but because we believe what we are doing is really valuable for the patients that we serve, especially close to home.” Rathgaber added that they currently have no plans to reduce the workforce.

Woleske added, “Both of our organizations have a lot of longevity.... We want to honor the legacy of both organizations while, at the same time, making a “one plus one equals three” kind of impact. And that, to me, is a big, big priority.”