

# HOSPITAL GOVERNANCE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES:

## HOW TRUSTEES CAN SUPPORT QUALITY & PATIENT SAFETY

Hospital trustees can play a central role in elevating quality and patient safety efforts in their hospitals. Boards for rural and critical access hospitals are particularly integral to these efforts, given their close ties to the community and trustees' ability to hear first-hand the challenges that patients and their family members may face.

Many boards, however, are underutilized in this role, owing to a lack of training or resources on how they can best support hospital leaders. In some small and rural communities, it can be difficult to even recruit and engage hospital trustees, making it even more critical to provide education and support for those who do take on the role.

We spoke with Jack King, Rural Hospital Flexibility Grants Manager, Montana Hospital Association, about his own experience as a trustee and what he's learned through working with numerous boards, especially at small, rural, and critical access hospitals.

**INTERVIEWEE:** Jack King

**ROLES OF INTERVIEWEE:** Montana Hospital Association Leader and Rural Governance Enthusiast

### **You started your career running a restaurant and tavern in downtown Great Falls. How did you end up leading hospital quality and patient safety work?**

I was a business owner and quite active in the community, including serving on multiple boards. I was recruited to join the board of one of the hospitals in town and grudgingly agreed, though I begged them not to put me on the finance committee. Instead, they made me the chair of the patient safety and quality committee, though I knew nothing about that topic.

Over the course of leading that committee, I began to drink the healthcare Kool Aid. Governance became my passion. I learned an incredible amount about the mission of the hospital and decided that I wanted to figure out a way to make a career in health care. I saw the damage that can be done by a poor board, as well the opportunity to improve the effectiveness of boards in rural communities through more education.

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### **Quality and patient safety is just one element of oversight that boards provide. Why is it important for boards to have a strong role in this area?**

Quality and safety are a “supermarket issue.” It’s much more likely that a trustee will be confronted in their community about quality or safety than, say, financial performance. And as a trustee, you want to know what’s going on and be able to have a conversation about what you’re working on to provide safe care.

**“Quality and safety are a “supermarket issue.”**



# HOW HOSPITAL BOARDS CAN SUPPORT QUALITY & PATIENT SAFETY - A CONVERSATION

## What are some common mistakes you see hospital boards make, especially as it relates to monitoring quality and safety?

First, hospital leaders must be transparent with their board; trustees shouldn't tolerate anything less than full transparency. Second, board members can sometimes micromanage and get involved in operations. Especially in smaller communities, because they may get more casual or informal feedback from patients, they can sometimes react in ways that overstep their boundaries.

When I was on a board, we had a patient complaint that remained unresolved for months. The patient refused to close out the complaint until she spoke with someone in leadership, but the CEO was not willing to address the issue head on. I offered to speak with her. Our CEO didn't support this, but it was my prerogative as a trustee to do so.

She had endured a tragedy – her father died on the operating table, the surgeon's notification was brusque and seemingly disrespectful, and the morgue lost her father's body for a period of time. She was understandably upset and was also carrying a lot of guilt about her relationship with her father.

Our 20-minute conversation ended in all of us in tears but we resolved the issue. She just wanted to be recognized and heard.



**When we listen,  
we all improve.**

This experience taught me about what not to do (wishing away patient complaints), as well as the powerful role that trustee can play in meeting with patients to hear and understand their grievances. When we listen, we all improve.

## Data is integral for trustees to understand their hospital's quality and safety performance. How do you recommend hospitals share that data with their boards?

First, make sure the board has a quality committee and that they receive regular reports. Most facilities use a dashboard or scorecard to visually show their measures and targets. Smaller facilities often use data from the [Medicare Beneficiary Quality Improvement Project \(MBQIP\)](#), though those data are sometimes not relevant in very small facilities.

Most importantly, figure out what data is relevant to your hospital and your community. You can pull from numerous projects and sources, but you need to narrow your focus to what matters to you and your patients.



**"Narrow your focus to what matters to you and your patients."**



# HOW HOSPITAL BOARDS CAN SUPPORT QUALITY & PATIENT SAFETY - A CONVERSATION

## **What unique challenges do rural communities face in recruiting hospital trustees?**

Smaller communities, by definition, have a smaller pool of folks who are interested or qualified. It's often the same people who are serving on school boards, bank board, etc. Especially as hospitals are being challenged to think more about social drivers of health, it's more important than ever to look for "non-traditional" board members and seek as much diversity as possible. Community advisory councils can often be a great recruitment tool for hospital board members.

## **What is the single most important thing a hospital board can do to support quality and safety?**

Be involved. Get the data from your leadership team. For hospitals that are acquired by a larger system, over time you'll have less pressure to focus on the hospital's finances, which opens up opportunities to focus on quality and safety.

## **How do you stay optimistic when the number of challenges within the health care system feel overwhelming?**

I'm inspired by the caliber and commitment of people in health care. What we do every day really matters, and failure is simply not an option. We can't give up.

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