

RURAL HOSPITALS: DESIGNING FOR RESILIENCE IN AN EVOLVING HEALTHCARE LANDSCAPE

How thoughtful planning, flexible design and technology can help rural hospitals strengthen access to care

Rural hospitals have long served as the backbone of their communities. Beyond delivering healthcare, they are often among the largest employers, economic drivers, and trusted institutions in the regions they serve. Yet today, many rural healthcare organizations face unprecedented financial, operational, and workforce challenges that threaten their long-term sustainability.

During a recent episode of BSA by Design, BSA principals Mark Abbey, AIA, NCARB, and Tom Bahr, AIA, NCARB, EDAC, WELL AP, LEED AP, discussed how strategic planning and thoughtful facility design can help rural hospitals remain resilient while continuing to meet the evolving needs of their communities.



Rural Healthcare Is More Than a Rural Issue

While rural hospitals face unique challenges, their success—or failure—has far-reaching implications.

When a rural hospital reduces services or closes, patients often travel farther for care, increasing demand on neighboring health systems and creating delays in treatment. Specialty services such as obstetrics, behavioral health, oncology, cardiology and general surgery are often among the first to become difficult to sustain, leaving entire regions without timely access to critical care.

Financial pressures continue to mount. Many rural hospitals operate with narrow margins while maintaining around-the-clock emergency services and inpatient capabilities regardless of patient volume. Unlike larger metropolitan hospitals, rural providers cannot rely on high patient volumes to offset operating costs.

“These hospitals aren’t simply healthcare facilities,” Abbey explained. “They’re economic engines for their communities. When a hospital struggles, the impact extends well beyond healthcare.”

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The Challenge Goes Beyond the Building

The future of rural healthcare cannot be solved through facility improvements alone. Success requires balancing three interconnected realities:

- Reimbursement models that often do not adequately support rural care delivery.
- Persistent workforce shortages affecting physicians, nurses and specialists.
- Aging facilities designed decades ago for a very different model of healthcare.

These factors influence one another. Limited reimbursement affects staffing. Staffing limitations influence operational models. Facility design must support both.

Rather than designing for ideal staffing levels, Bahr emphasized that healthcare planners must design for realistic, sustainable operations.

“Our goal is to create environments that support flexibility,” Bahr said. “Healthcare delivery, staffing models and technology will continue to evolve, so our facilities have to evolve with them.”

Reinventing Existing Facilities

Many rural hospitals occupy buildings constructed 50 to 75 years ago. While replacing an entire campus may be ideal, it is rarely financially feasible.

Instead, healthcare leaders are increasingly focusing on strategic reinvestment.

Master planning allows organizations to prioritize improvements over time while ensuring each renovation supports long-term goals. Rather than making isolated decisions department by department, hospitals can develop a roadmap that aligns facility investments with future clinical needs.

Abbey shared an example where underutilized space adjacent to an emergency department was transformed into a dedicated trauma entrance and rapid medical examination area. The redesign improved patient privacy, streamlined emergency care and reduced unnecessary construction costs by maximizing existing space.

These types of improvements demonstrate how thoughtful planning can produce meaningful operational gains without requiring entirely new facilities.

Flexible Spaces Support Operational Efficiency

With workforce shortages affecting nearly every healthcare organization, facility design has become an important operational strategy.

Flexible exam rooms, shared support spaces and standardized treatment rooms allow hospitals to adapt services based on changing patient demand while reducing duplicate staffing and unnecessary square footage.

Design strategies such as hub-and-spoke layouts and racetrack nursing units can shorten staff travel distances, improve visibility between caregivers and place supplies closer to patients. These efficiencies reduce staff fatigue while improving response times.

“Ultimately,” Abbey noted, “the human body hasn’t changed. Designing universal spaces that can accommodate multiple specialties gives hospitals flexibility for years to come.”

As the backbone of many communities, rural hospitals need flexible, forward-thinking solutions that strengthen resilience, improve access to care, and prepare for the future.

Technology Is Expanding Access

Technology is transforming how rural hospitals deliver care.

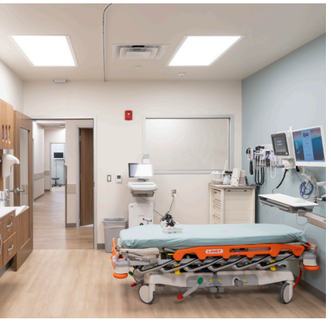
Telehealth has become an essential tool for connecting patients with specialists who may be hundreds of miles away while helping local providers manage increasingly complex patient populations.

Rather than replacing traditional care, virtual care extends clinical expertise into communities where specialty physicians may not be available full-time.

Successful implementation, however, requires more than installing cameras and monitors.

Technology-enabled spaces must be intuitive for both patients and caregivers. Clear room layouts, integrated audiovisual systems and staff-supported workflows help reduce anxiety and improve the patient experience, particularly for older adults who may be less familiar with digital technology.

As hospitals continue investing in hybrid care models, technology should enhance—not complicate—the human connection at the center of healthcare.








Workforce Development Starts with Place

Recruiting clinicians remains one of the greatest challenges facing rural healthcare organizations.

Increasingly, healthcare leaders are recognizing that workforce development requires physical infrastructure alongside recruitment strategies.

Training spaces, student partnerships, continuing education environments and even workforce housing can all strengthen local talent pipelines. Rather than treating these as separate initiatives, organizations are beginning to incorporate workforce development into long-term campus planning.

Creating environments where healthcare professionals can learn, collaborate and grow helps rural hospitals build sustainable staffing models while strengthening ties to their communities.



Purposefully designed environments for education and professional growth help rural healthcare organizations build sustainable staffing models while deepening community partnerships.

Looking Ahead

Despite today's challenges, both Abbey and Bahr remain optimistic about the future of rural healthcare.

Success over the next decade will depend on creating adaptable facilities that support changing care models, stronger regional partnerships and integrated technology while keeping care close to home.

The advice for healthcare leaders preparing for future investments is straightforward: begin with the care model—not the building.

By understanding how services will be delivered, how staff will work and how communities will evolve, hospitals can make thoughtful investments that position them for long-term success.

For Indiana's rural hospitals, resilience will not be defined by the size of the facility, but by its ability to adapt. Strategic planning, flexible design and collaborative partnerships will help ensure these essential community institutions continue providing high-quality care for generations to come.



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