

APPLICANT

Darlene Rodowicz, President and CEO of Berkshire Health Systems

Good evening. I'm Darlene Rodowicz, President and CEO of Berkshire Health Systems. On behalf of all of us at BHS, I would like to thank Commissioner Robbie Goldstein, Chairman Dennis Renaud, Director of the DoN Office, and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health for giving us this opportunity to discuss our vision for bringing inpatient care back to North Adams and Northern Berkshire County.

Our goal is to expand access to healthcare in the underserved region of North Berkshire. However, to understand the full implications of what this project really means for the community, I'd like to share a bit about North Adams and the overall healthcare landscape in the area.

North Adams is a city that has worked hard to transcend its identity as an aging mill town. Despite advances in economic and cultural redevelopment, North Adams remains a community with significant healthcare needs. Many residents are seniors, with increasing health concerns, and a large portion of the community faces both socioeconomic and health challenges relating to substance use and limited opportunities for economic advancement.

The abrupt closure of North Adams Regional Hospital in 2014 didn't just result in the loss of a hospital facility. It created a region-wide emergency that disrupted access to fundamental health care and caused a broader disruption in the community's well-being and economic stability.

The story of hospital closures impacting rural communities is not unique to Berkshire County or even to Massachusetts. Many national conversations around healthcare link challenges in access with increasing rates of health disparities, particularly in rural regions where inequities are perpetuated by deeply rooted and profoundly flawed historical systems and processes.

In 2020, a federal report underscored the need for policy-driven solutions to achieve health equity. And it was against this backdrop that changes to the CMS criteria for Critical Access Hospital (or CAH) designation emerged. The Critical Access Hospital designation, with its cost-based reimbursement, helps to ensure the continuation of essential health services in rural and underserved areas across the country. It is a lifeline for rural communities like ours, and the reason why we have brought this project forward.

I'd like to direct your attention to the three core elements of our proposal to help explain why BHS's proposal to bring inpatient hospital care back to North Adams is so critical to our region:

First—Clinical Care: Returning inpatient beds to North Adams under a Critical Access Hospital designation will have clear impact on the accessibility of care for patients, which in-turn can directly lead to improved health outcomes. Our BHS providers are

excited about the ways that a Critical Access Hospital can offer unique and flexible options for rural patient care and focus much-needed resources on addressing the health challenges of our community's most vulnerable residents.

Second—Social and Economic Opportunity: For North Adams, the possibility of opening a Critical Access Hospital is a chance to help revitalize a community. Our health system administrators and community partners are eager to continue enhancing our programs for education, employment, and health equity in ways that will support growth and opportunity for residents of North Adams and the surrounding areas. And the overwhelming community support we've received, including numerous letters following our public meeting this past summer, underscores a shared community understanding of the profound potential of this project.

Third—Stewardship and Sustainability: As you will see from the data submitted with our proposal, our Northern Berkshire community needs an inpatient hospital. This need was made clear at the time of the hospital closure ten years ago in the Stroudwater Report commissioned by the State and remains true today. Each facet of our proposal underscores our commitment to addressing the public health priorities of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, including ensuring that the healthcare we provide is accessible, sustainable, and of high value to the public. BHS is committed to collaborating with local, state, and federal entities to ensure the sustainability of healthcare in the region.

I hope you will agree that this project offers us an exceptional opportunity to address barriers to patient care, promote social and economic improvement, and advance the health and wellness of the Northern Berkshire region, and our entire community. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Richard Alcombright, Community Member, BHS Board of Trustees, Former Mayor of North Adams

Good evening, everyone. My name is Richard Alcombright and I am a resident of North Adams. I am currently a volunteer member of the BHS Board of Trustees and I served as the Mayor of North Adams for 8 years including during the unexpected closure of North Adams Regional Hospital in 2014. I am pleased beyond words to see our hospital....North Adams Regional Hospital....bringing back inpatient care.

The abruptness of the hospital's closure took us all by surprise. In leadership, you often have procedures and guidelines for various challenges, but nothing prepared me for the sudden loss of a community's medical lifeline. Our hospital provided both healthcare and economic stability and its sudden closure was a major blow to our identity...in so many ways. I maintain that we were incredibly blessed to have Berkshire Health Systems there to sustain and rebuild services.

I am incredibly proud to serve on the Board of Berkshire Health Systems and can wholeheartedly say that this project is a tremendous step in advancing the organization's strategic efforts to improve healthcare access as part of our mission to advance and expand health and wellness for everyone in the community. Bringing inpatient care to North Adams will help to address major barriers to care for our residents and will help create connections to the many individuals and families in this region struggling with poverty and poor health outcomes.

I was particularly pleased to learn about BHS's proposed focus on supporting local efforts to address opioid addiction through the Community Health Initiative (CHI). There is hardly a family in the region that hasn't been touched in some way by the addiction of a friend or loved one. On a deeply personal note, my family's own journey with substance use has cemented my belief in the necessity of local support and resources, and I'm optimistic that the revival of our hospital, with a focus on reducing health disparities....and supporting the most vulnerable in our community, will be instrumental in bolstering our fight against substance use disorders.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Alec Belman, MD, Chief of Staff at Fairview Hospital

Good evening, members of the Department of Public Health and fellow attendees. I'm Dr. Alec Belman, resident of Richmond, and Chief of Staff at Fairview Hospital, BHS's Critical Access Hospital in Great Barrington. I am also an ex-officio member of the BHS Board of Trustees.

Rural communities across Berkshire County from North to South face distinct challenges in ensuring access to healthcare. However, these challenges have always presented us with opportunities to innovate. This type of flexibility is at the core of the Critical Access Hospital program, which was designed to provide various types of short-term care for rural patients close to home.

One of the flexible program elements provided for by the federal government is the swing bed program, which allows Critical Access Hospital to provide skilled-nursing level care to patients who do not need hospital-level of care, but still have high acuity conditions. Patients benefit from staying in a familiar environment, surrounded by a consistent care team. This not only enhances their care experience but does so without imposing additional costs on the system.

In my experience at Fairview, swing beds have been an invaluable resource for patients to have a convenient transitional care option that is close to home. This project will be able to offer similar value to North County patients and will be especially helpful to those with a high level of health and social needs who can receive continuous care in one location that spans both their acute and post-acute care needs.

Additionally, at Berkshire Medical Center, we routinely have patients with delayed discharge due to various barriers to placement at local post-acute facilities. Having the flexibility of swing beds will enable us to continue providing short-term care for those patients who are eligible— getting them the right level of care at the right time. Being able to shift appropriate patients to swing bed status at a Critical Access Hospital also helps preserve the availability of acute inpatient resources at Berkshire Medical Center for those with higher-level needs, an approach that CMS and DPH supported during the height of the COVID crisis.

I wholeheartedly support this project for creating a Critical Access Hospital in North Adams and appreciate your consideration.

Amber Besaw, Northern Berkshire Community Coalition

Hello, everyone. I'm Amber Besaw, Executive Director of the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition and resident of North Adams. At nbCC, health & wellness is one central area of focus in our work to achieve our mission of empowering the members of our northern Berkshire region to enhance the quality of their lives. We are encouraged by the possibility of inpatient care once again being available in a new North Adams Regional Hospital-- a place that would be welcoming and accessible to all members of our community.

This project would be a significant step by Berkshire Health Systems toward bridging healthcare gaps and providing essential support for the families and individuals in our community, across the lifespan, who struggle with generational poverty, systemic barriers to healthcare, transportation issues, food insecurity, homelessness, substance use disorder, and domestic violence. Additionally, for members of our community who are living into the later years of their lives, access to healthcare in their home community can mean so much for them and their families, extending the continuum of care that they can find close to home. For these families and individuals, having access to local, quality healthcare can be, and often is, life-changing.

Berkshire Health System's commitment to community partnerships aligns with our mission, and we look forward to working even more closely together to create a cohesive, supportive environment for our community members.

On behalf of the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, we look forward to collaborating with Berkshire Health Systems and other community partners to support the project to open the new North Adams Regional Hospital and strive to make our shared vision of a thriving northern Berkshire region become a reality.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Michele Biron, Community Member

Good evening. My name is Michele Biron. I was born and raised in North Berkshire County, and I am currently a resident of Adams. Both of my children were born at the old North Adams Regional Hospital, but the most amount of time I've spent in our local healthcare facilities has been in caring for my elderly parents.

After the hospital closed, the biggest problem was that we had to go to BMC in Pittsfield for inpatient care. It had been so much more convenient to have a hospital right nearby, and what was more important—it was comforting to my parents to be in a hospital they were familiar with. Needing to go to the hospital is hard enough, but when they faced the knowledge that a hospital stay meant a trip to Pittsfield, it was even more overwhelming. Whether it was a UTI or a respiratory virus, traveling to BMC put a lot of extra stress on both them and us.

My parents are now in a nursing home, but I, myself, am almost 72. And, personally, I would like to know that if I need hospital care, I could be taken care of in North Adams so that it would be easier on my family.

I strongly support BHS's proposal to bring inpatient beds back to North Adams. Thank you for recognizing the value and that re-establishing this care will have on our rural community.

Patrick Borek, Vice President of Human Resources, Berkshire Health Systems

Good evening. My name is Patrick Borek, and I am a resident of Dalton, MA. As the VP for Human Resources for Berkshire Health Systems, I am well aware of the challenges and opportunities inherent in maintaining our healthcare workforce in our region. The decision to reopen the North Adams hospital as a Critical Access Hospital offers our community an exciting opportunity for economic growth and career advancement. We have estimated that the North Adams Critical Access Hospital project will create between 60 and 70 new positions on the North Adams campus. This is a significant boost to our local employment landscape and represents a growth of about 37% on the North Adams campus. These positions span a range of roles, many of which are included in SEIU and MNA bargaining units. I'm pleased to share that we are in full agreement with both unions that the existing bargaining units and associated labor agreements will remain in place. Therefore we will continue to honor the existing labor agreements at this campus with respect to new staff and new positions in these bargaining units. We have been meeting with both unions to discuss the changes, provide information, and gain input and suggestions on the transition as we move forward.

One of the great benefits of this project is the opportunity it presents for our employees. We expect that a number of current employees who live in North Berkshire and previously worked for North Adams Regional Hospital will apply for internal transfers in order to work closer to home. This type of internal transfer will help ensure that BHS' high standards will be reflected throughout our system. Working closer to home not only reduces commute times but enhances work-life balance. We've also seen former employees, drawn by the prospect of serving their community, considering coming out of retirement, or postponing their retirement plans. This not only augments our workforce, but also brings a wealth of experience back into our fold.

Furthermore, our commitment to the community goes beyond immediate healthcare needs. We're incredibly proud of our portfolio of career pathway programs that are designed to reduce barriers to employment by helping to recruit and train the region's skilled healthcare workforce from within our very own community. Conducted in partnership with local educational institutions—specifically Berkshire Community College, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and McCann Technical School—the career pathways programs are working to train nursing assistants, registered nurses (trained to deliver a hospital level of care rather than a skilled-nursing facility level of care), LPNs, medical assistants, imaging technologists, respiratory therapists, and more. These programs not only develop a pipeline of skilled healthcare workers, but give trainees access to an entire career path in healthcare—one that is accompanied by strong opportunities for advancement, competitive wages targeted at the market median, and robust benefits.

By creating employment opportunities and strengthening educational partnerships through the North Adams Critical Access Hospital project, we're investing in both the sustainability of healthcare and the economic growth of Berkshire County. Thank you.

Marie Harpin, Community Member

Hello everyone. My name is Marie Harpin, and I am a resident of North Adams. I would like to share some of my personal experiences with accessing healthcare in our area and emphasize how valuable it is to have healthcare close to home.

My mom, Mimi Harpin, is 85 years old. She is a native of North Adams and very involved in the community as a leader throughout her life. Over the years, she has had various health issues, and my siblings and I have taken on the role of caregivers.

North Adams Regional Hospital was the only hospital where my mom had ever received care, and when it closed in 2014, it felt like it was detrimental to her well-being. Over the past 10 years, she has experienced several emergencies that have required trips to the emergency room and hospital stays, and it has honestly been very difficult to get her to agree to go in for care since NARH closed. At first, she protested and said she was simply not going. She eventually agreed to getting the care she needed because she knew she had to. But it definitely took her time to adjust.

This past August, mom went to the emergency department on the North Adams campus. She received great care there, but ended up needing to be admitted for a few days, so she was transferred to Berkshire Medical Center in Pittsfield. For my siblings and me, it's really difficult to get down to BMC. I work for Avangrid, the energy company, at two different sites in North Berkshire and Southern Vermont. To visit my mom in the hospital in Pittsfield, I typically need to take a day or half a day off from work, which is really challenging for me.

The prospect of having inpatient care right in North Adams would be amazing for me and my siblings. It would be a lot easier to visit my mom, bring her the things she needs, and coordinate with her doctors and her care team. Being in a familiar environment would also help to relieve some of the anxiety that she feels when dealing with her health challenges. It would be comforting both to her and to us to know that she was nearby.

My mom is here with me now and she wanted me to share that "having beds in North Adams will give better health access to the elderly because transportation to Pittsfield is a major problem for many of us in the north Berkshires."

North Berkshire is an aging community and I strongly believe that our experience is not unique. There are a lot of people out there like me and a lot of people like my mom. And for some, traveling to Pittsfield is not an accessible option due to transportation, winter weather, or other challenges.

Bringing inpatient beds back to North Adams means that more families like mine can be present, both physically and emotionally, during some of life's most challenging moments. Thank you for considering the deep impact this project will have on families throughout our community.

Jennifer Macksey, Mayor of North Adams

Good evening. I am Jennifer Macksey, resident of North Adams and the city's mayor.

As Mayor, I'm deeply committed to the growth and well-being of North Adams, and I strongly believe that the re-opening of inpatient care by BHS will have a positive overall impact on the future of our region. Healthcare is a cornerstone of any thriving community. Beyond treatments, it's about understanding, accessibility, and the assurance that every resident's well-being is prioritized.

The revival of North Adams Regional Hospital exemplifies this vision and will help to make widespread access to essential healthcare services a reality, especially for our many aging residents who face challenges accessing timely medical care due to distance and transportation. Reopening our local hospital is a practical solution to ensure that medical care is within reach for everyone.

I am also optimistic about the economic opportunities for employment and education that the hospital will provide to our residents. Our hospital's return represents more than a medical facility—it symbolizes our collective commitment to health, progress, and community resilience. I fully support this initiative as a key step towards a brighter and healthier future for North Adams. Thank you.

John Meaney, Chief and General Manager of Northern Berkshire EMS

Good evening, my name is John Meaney. I am a resident of North Adams and I have the privilege of serving the community as the chief and general manager of Northern Berkshire EMS, the sole provider of emergency medical services to ten municipalities in the northern Berkshire, southern Vermont region. As someone who's dedicated his life to ensuring the timely and effective delivery of emergency care, I can't overstate the significance of having care resources close to home, both for our Emergency Medical Service providers and for our community as a whole.

In my role, I see firsthand how our EMS teams work tirelessly to respond to emergencies. Our goal is always to provide the best care as quickly as possible. With a Critical Access Hospital right here in North Adams, we can drastically reduce transport times, ensuring that patients receive care faster and more efficiently. This not only improves outcomes but also allows our EMS teams to be ready for the next call sooner, bolstering our community's overall safety and system status management of our resources.

The opportunity that a local inpatient hospital offers for increased efficiency of our operations has the potential to make a significant impact on Northern Berkshire EMS and our ability to serve the community. Fewer hour to hour-and-a-half round trips to connect patients to inpatient care at Berkshire Medical Center in Pittsfield will reduce wear-and-tear on our vehicles and equipment, keep staff and patients safer during poor winter weather conditions, and allow us at Northern Berkshire EMS to instead direct our resources to ongoing system improvements.

We are also excited about how the availability of inpatient care at a Critical Access Hospital in North Adams would better support patients requiring IV therapy and other treatment. At present, we are responsible for transporting patients with certain diagnoses from their nursing home to a hospital facility by ambulance to receive their treatments. Being able to care for these patients in swing beds on-site at the hospital would be a game-changer, both for the patients and for Northern Berkshire EMS. Instead of transporting patients back and forth, they would receive continuous care in a single, familiar location and free up Northern Berkshire EMS to respond to acute emergencies more quickly.

I wholeheartedly support this project and urge everyone to recognize the immense benefits it will bring to our EMS services and the broader Northern Berkshire community. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jason Ogiste, MD, surgeon, BHS

Good evening, I'm Jason Ogiste, resident of Cheshire and urologic surgeon at Berkshire Health Systems. I am also the Medical Director of Surgical Specialty Practices for the BHS medical group.

The absence of a dedicated healthcare facility in North Adams and northern Berkshires has had tangible repercussions. One of the most evident is in the realm of surgical care. Without a local facility, our community members have often found themselves going undiagnosed or untreated for long period of time because they don't want to travel for care or putting off surgery due to the complicated and inconvenient travel arrangements necessary when scheduling an out-of-town procedure. As a surgeon, I have seen firsthand the clinical toll that a lack of access takes on many rural patients and their families. I've experienced patients in rural communities like ours arriving septic, unstable, or with acute bleeds-- and becoming sicker by the minute.

The BHS proposal aims to address this issue directly. With the reintroduction of the North Adams facility, BHS can offer expanded surgical services right at the community's doorstep. More importantly, these services will be complemented by back-up inpatient care, ensuring a comprehensive approach. This not only facilitates timely interventions, but also ensures that patients have necessary post-surgical care immediately available.

The efficiency that this project promises is significant. Having the capability to provide inpatient and outpatient surgical care in North Adams for our surrounding communities streamlines both the patient's journey and the clinical provider's experience. It reduces wait times, ensures continuity of care, and fundamentally transforms the healthcare experience for both community members and the healthcare professionals who serve them.

Furthermore, it has the potential to help recruit and retain surgeons to our area. As a surgeon myself, I can attest that we always prefer to operate in the same location where our patients can receive inpatient surgical care, which allows for optimal care coordination.

This project is a step towards a more proactive, efficient, and patient-centric healthcare model for North Adams and the Northern Berkshires as a whole. I stand firmly behind this vision and urge you to consider its profound impact on our community's health.

Thank you.

Lou Ann Quinn, RN, Former Site Director of the North Campus/Clinical Manager of the Satellite Emergency Facility

Good evening. My name is Lou Ann Quinn and my town of residence is North Adams, Massachusetts. I was the former Site Director of the North Campus as well as the Clinical Manager of the Satellite Emergency Facility since 2014—after the closure of the North Adams Regional Hospital. Prior to this, I was a nursing director for NARH from 1976 to 2014.

The 2014 closure of NARH was heartbreaking for me and the recent opportunity to apply for a CAH designation and re-open inpatient services provides an amazing opportunity for us to promote better health outcomes for patients in our community. Though I just recently retired on September 30, I will do everything in my power to support and promote this venture.

Inpatient care in our community means that patients can get essential care close to home. Patients with pneumonia, heart failure, COPD, UTI, and chest pain, (among other diagnoses) could receive care right here in North Adams, rather than being stabilized in our satellite emergency department and then transported for inpatient care to another facility. With family, friends, and community resources close-by, patients are more likely to experience positive outcomes. Providing care close to home helps reduce the impact of social challenges like lack of available transportation to go home after discharge. Further, limited ambulance transport resources will now be reserved for patients who need to go to our Main Campus or a tertiary facility for a higher level of care than can be provided at our CAH. This will decrease delays in transfer and promote better access to critical care.

Additionally, the comfort and convenience of a local inpatient facility makes it easier for patients to seek care when they need it, instead of waiting until their symptoms get worse. I have personally observed that patients in North County tend to avoid or defer care due to lack of transportation (and financial resources), or available social supports. By offering hospital level care close to home, BHS will be able to deepen its relationship with patients so that the North County patient population will be less likely to defer timely and important care, and therefore will be more likely to experience positive health outcomes.

I'd like to share a quick story about a patient who delayed care and presented to the SEF after days of increasing chest pain. The patient was markedly hypertensive and short of breath on arrival. Fortunately, the patient's anginal symptoms were rapidly managed and an impending myocardial infarction warded off, but they needed further observation and explained that major reason for not coming to the hospital was that a family member needed care at home and the patient would be unable to do this from Pittsfield. By having beds here in North Adams, the patient acknowledged they would have been more willing to come at the onset of their pain and would have found it easier to navigate the additional required days of observation.

By improving access to care, this project can support our most vulnerable residents and help create a healthier future for North Adams and the whole Northern Berkshire region. I strongly support his project and thank you for your consideration.

Charles Redd, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer at BHS

Good evening, everyone. My name is Charles Redd; I am a resident of Dalton, MA, and I am proud to serve as BHS's first officer for diversity, equity, and inclusion (or DEI). Our BHS mission, which was adopted by our board in 2021, is, at its core, a commitment to DEI—to advance health and wellness for everyone in our community. Our commitment to the Northern Berkshire community—with its high levels of poverty and an aging population with many chronic illnesses—is unwavering. While we understand that a single initiative won't dissolve the deep-rooted health disparities overnight, the reopening of North Adams Regional Hospital as a Critical Access Hospital is an integral step on this journey.

We plan to use the hospital as a touchpoint for screening and addressing social determinants of health, the broader socio-economic and environmental factors that impact health, such as housing, economic stability, and transportation. This proactive step can guide our community members to the resources they need, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

We have also committed to collecting and analyzing patient data at the new North Adams Regional Hospital. By doing so, we will be better equipped to recognize patterns, understand the unique health challenges of our community, and tailor our interventions accordingly. This data will serve as the foundation for our targeted health equity initiatives.

Lastly, the hospital will be a catalyst for extending our reach into the community. By fostering partnerships and rolling out educational and outreach programs, we aim to address the most pressing health challenges, especially in areas like chronic disease and substance use disorders.

The North Adams project is a testament to our dedication to expanding access to care, especially in regions like North Adams that face heightened challenges. It is a chance to address barriers, enhance access, and take another step on our long journey towards health equity.

Thank you.

Scott St. George, Chief Financial Officer, BHS

Hello. I'm Scott St. George. I'm a resident of Richmond, MA and I serve as Chief Financial Officer at Berkshire Health Systems.

As we move forward with the proposal to re-establish North Adams Regional Hospital, I want to highlight the dedication BHS has shown in ensuring both the viability and sustainability of healthcare in our region. This initiative is a testament to our commitment to stewardship, ensuring we utilize resources wisely and effectively for the betterment of our community.

For the past 10 years since the bankruptcy and closure of the former North Adams hospital, we have consistently worked in a proactive, creative manner to ensure that the residents of North County have access to high-quality care right at their doorstep. We have done this through the North County Campus of BMC, where we have provided 24/7 emergency care and other outpatient services since shortly after North Adams closed. And now, recent changes in the Critical Access Hospital designation have opened a door for us, making inpatient beds in North Adams a new reality. The opportunity to implement the critical access hospital designation would enable us to be self-sufficient and provide the full continuum of care.

Based on the community demographics and our understanding of the current patient panel in Northern Berkshire, we estimate that a significant portion of the patients we expect to serve in North Adams would be beneficiaries of Medicare and Medicaid. Our commitment to these especially vulnerable populations is unwavering. By bringing inpatient care closer to them, we aim to improve health outcomes, reduce re-admissions, and prevent adverse health events. This approach not only enhances the quality of care our patients receive but also offers higher value care in the long run.

In conclusion, at BHS, our focus has always been on balancing the immediate needs of our community with the long-term sustainability of healthcare in the region. This project exemplifies our commitment to that goal, and I am confident that with the support of this community and the hard work of our BHS team, we will continue to elevate the standard of care in North Adams and the broader Northern Berkshire area.

Thank you.