

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2201

February 29, 2024

Matthew Heywood
President & CEO
Aspirus Health
2200 Westwood Drive
Wausau, WI 54401

Mr. Heywood,

We write to express our concerns regarding the recently announced closure and consolidation of facilities at Aspirus Ontonagon Hospital, and to request further information regarding this decision.

In 2007, the Village of Ontonagon sold the hospital – then called Ontonagon Memorial Hospital – to Aspirus for one dollar. As part of this deal, the village even agreed to keep the pension liability for 134 former employees. This favorable arrangement for Aspirus was made to ensure that health services would be able to be maintained for residents and visitors in the Ontonagon area.

In September of 2021, Aspirus announced it would construct a new \$15.8 million facility to replace the current hospital, to include inpatient and observation beds, an emergency department, and other services. As part of this announcement, then-hospital CAO Dylan Taylor touted Aspirus's "commitment to the Ontonagon community" in providing residents "with a modern facility to meet the primary and emergent care needs of those we serve into the future". As recently as March of 2022 Aspirus put out a press release saying that plans for the new hospital were being finalized – although it appears that this release is no longer available to view on Aspirus Health's website.

It seems the plan to invest in a new facility was quietly abandoned in favor of closing hospital services altogether.

The most concerning aspect of this announcement is the closure of emergency room operations. Even without full inpatient care, rural emergency rooms are essential for quickly treating and stabilizing patients before they are transferred to a larger facility. Ontonagon Hospital hosts the only ER in Ontonagon County – the third largest county in the state. Closure of the Ontonagon ER will have very real consequences and could directly endanger the lives of Michiganders.

While Aspirus has stated that there will be no changes to existing EMS services in Ontonagon, this doesn't capture the whole story. The closure of Ontonagon's ER will force ambulances to transport patients far greater distances, with the next closest emergency room in Baraga being 48 miles away.

Forcing the existing ambulances to now make a two-hour round trip for a single emergency response will directly lead to reduced access to EMS services.

Additionally, while the hospital is located in a small rural community, there is significant need for emergency health care in the area. Ontonagon County is home to the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park, which hosts more than 300,000 visitors per year. The White Pine North copper mine project is also rapidly approaching approval by the State of Michigan – adding additional need for emergency health care capacity.

We are also concerned that there was seemingly no communication or consultation with members of the community or local leaders prior to the closure being announced. In fact, several local elected officials were directly told before the announcement that no changes to the facility would be made.

While we appreciate your stated commitment to the Upper Peninsula, this decision and the way it has been handled with the public seriously call that into question.

With these concerns in mind, we respectfully request responses to the following questions:

- **What changed between March of 2022 and now for Aspirus to abandon plans for a new hospital facility in Ontonagon?**
- **What actions has Aspirus taken thus far to keep the Ontonagon facility fully open and operational?**
- **Did Aspirus in any way consult with Ontonagon County Emergency Services or SONCO Ambulance on the impact of the emergency room closure prior to the decision being made?**
- **To what extent did Aspirus consider the option to maintain a free-standing emergency department – like Aspirus currently operates at the Stevens Point campus – while closing inpatient services?**
- **Why has Aspirus not pursued a Rural Emergency Hospital designation for Ontonagon?**

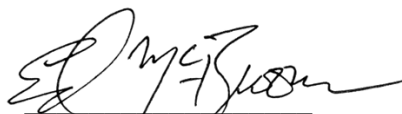
We wholeheartedly understand the difficulties that come with providing health care to rural and remote parts of the country, and we are committed to doing what we can as legislators to address these challenges.

We stand ready to assist in any way possible to address this situation, but Aspirus Health must do its part to protect the health and well-being of those in the Upper Peninsula who it claims to care about.

Sincerely,



Jack Bergman
Member of Congress



Ed McBroom
Michigan State Senator



Gregory Markkanen
Michigan State Representative