

T O P L I N E S U M M A R Y
C R A C I U N R E S E A R C H G R O U P
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Focus Group Research

The two focus groups included men and women living in Cordova who participated in the recent survey. A screener was established that questioned satisfaction with availability of health care in Cordova, importance of having health care available in the community, and views on structures. The first group was made up of residents with middle range opinions leaning toward the City and Village working together. The second group included those with middle range opinions leaning toward bringing in a third party outside health organization.

Healthcare in Alaska/Cordova

Participants from both groups believe Cordova's healthcare facilities are nice and that basic health care needs are covered locally. However, the key issue is consistency and stability. People like to develop long-term relationship with physicians, and the turnover in Cordova of good quality medical providers is a concern for both groups. People want physicians who will be with them for many years – those who become familiar with their medical history – so that they do not have to start over with their backgrounds every time a new doctor takes over in Cordova. They place a lot of value on having confidence in a provider and building trust.

Some respondents believe that having more than one facility is not necessary for a community the size of Cordova. Many believe that quantity of care is not the issue—it is more important to ensure that quality healthcare is available locally, regardless of who the provider or institution may be. The medical needs of Cordova could be served by one facility if the quality is there. In fact, having more than one facility is not only overkill, but also can be confusing to residents, as some are not sure which place they are supposed to go to or which place will even accept them as patients.

Why People Travel out of Cordova for Care

Cordova residents do not like to have to leave town to get healthcare. However, specialists are not typically available locally, so people have to travel to bigger cities like Anchorage to get advanced care. For example, many comment about how inconvenient it is to have to 'live' in Anchorage for about a month while awaiting the birth of a child--simply because Cordova does not have the ability to perform maternity services.

Additionally, general practitioners tend to stay more long-term in the bigger cities, and residents of Cordova will travel so they can get the consistency of a single familiar provider. Even though there may be high quality physicians available locally, the constant change associated with doctors moving in and out of Cordova drives people to seek medical relationships in bigger cities that do not have the chronic medical provider turnover.

Because Cordova does not have enough demand to support full-time specialists, residents often try to book a day full of doctor appointments in bigger cities like Anchorage so that

they only have to travel once in awhile for healthcare. Because of this, most respondents like the idea of having specialists that visit Cordova on a regular basis to offer these services locally. For example, if the same cardiologist could come in once a month or once a quarter, locals could have the consistency of seeing the same specialist, yet not have to travel out of Cordova to do so.

Challenge of Keeping Good Healthcare Providers Local

Both groups perceive some key issues that fuel the constant turnover of doctors in Cordova. First, the politics of funding and the city running local healthcare can drive doctors away because they are not allowed to operate their own practices as businesses. People refer to a lot of healthcare providers in Cordova as travelers. They do not intend to stay long term, and they cycle through. They do not get involved in the community, and they do not spend money and support the local economy. It is almost like the mindset of healthcare providers is that medical stints in Cordova are meant to be temporary.

Despite the issue of cycling through providers, residents feel strongly that Cordova is a very nice place to live and raise a family. There are plenty of reasons why physicians should consider making Cordova their long-term home. For instance, the geography is beautiful, the community is heavily focused on the great outdoors, and the city is very environmentally oriented. There are many things to do and see in the area. Cordova has a lot of culture, and some believe there is a strong scientific, musical, and creative aspect to the population. There are many very intelligent people who call Cordova home, and yet there is not the pretentiousness you often find in places with above-average education levels.

Importance of Keeping Healthcare in Cordova

It seems impractical to most that Cordova could operate without a hospital or medical facility. Envisioning the prospect that all medical cases might have to be medevac'd out of the city for proper care causes a lot of concern for most people.

Additionally, a few respondents from each group seemed to quickly realize that if Cordova loses its hospital, it will ultimately lose the Coast Guard as well. Losing the Coast Guard would dramatically slice into population numbers, start a downward spiral, and the local economy could crumble. Once the other respondents heard this, they were extremely concerned.

Who Should Pay for Local Healthcare

Each group had only a few respondents who clearly understood the structure and funding formulas for Cordova Community Medical Center and the Ilanka Community Health Center. However, most of the people were confused or knew very little about how these systems worked, how they were funded, and who they served.

Regardless, quite a few people in the second group agree that having the city manage the healthcare facility is not working effectively and change is sorely needed. Many believe a local hospital should be run by someone or some entity that has the proper knowledge, experience and skills in that industry. The city is not qualified to do this effectively, and this ultimately feeds the chronic issue of doctor turnover. Some believe that if doctors

were allowed to run their own practices under the umbrella of the hospital, local healthcare would be in much better hands and more likely to thrive.

Another key point is that if the local medical system were managed properly, more and more residents would stay in Cordova for care instead of traveling to places like Anchorage. This would provide more funding to local healthcare, which could take some of the load off of one single entity being financially responsible, such as the city. It becomes less of an issue ‘who should pay for local healthcare’ when the system is properly managed and local patronage provides fuel for the system to succeed.

Strategic Alternatives

A. Maintain Existing Structure: Respondents in both groups agree that the existing structure is not working and needs to be significantly changed. Although there are numerous types of arguments under this scenario, option A does not seem viable to anyone. Because of failed attempts at this option, the point is belabored.

B. Restructure Existing: For a variety of reasons, there is not a lot of faith that either one of the exiting entities could parent the other. Each has its own agenda and therefore is unable to be impartial. Additionally, there could be conflict due to a fundamental difference in practice—perhaps one entity is more holistic in nature, while the other one is more focused on traditional healthcare methods. Arguments abound as to why option B is not likely to be a true long-term solution.

C. Bring in a New Third Party: Those who support bringing in a new third party to operate all healthcare services tend to strongly believe that the current two healthcare entities in Cordova are mutually exclusive and could never be restructured to work together. Many are optimistic that a third party entity with the right professional expertise is a viable option, especially because it neutralizes special agendas and the subsequent political chaos. Even the members of the first group evolved to C as the most viable option because attempts to make anything resembling option A or B work in the past have led nowhere.

Believing a Solution Can be Found

Since each side tends to butt heads in efforts focused on working together, bringing in a neutral mediator seems to give most people hope that a solution can be found. People from both groups have heard success stories of similar situations, like in Valdez or Kodiak, and are therefore open to the prospect of the third party option. In fact, quite a few are aware that Providence, in particular, has been involved in reengineering and successfully operating in similar situations.

Before a majority of community members can support the process of narrowing down the right solution, more education is necessary regarding details of the current healthcare situations, possible alternative scenarios, and ramifications of moving from where healthcare in Cordova is now to where it might be in the future. It is not only important for residents to fully understand the details of each existing healthcare entity, but also understand the process it will require to move from where they are today to a more effective option C structure in the future.