

November 20, 2018

Dr. John Dreyzehner  
Commissioner  
Tennessee Department of Health  
710 James Robertson Parkway  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243

Dear Dr. Dreyzehner,

One week ago, Ballad Health announced their initial plans for consolidation of services within the Northeast Tennessee / Southwest Virginia Market. These plans call for a regionalization of neonatal and perinatal services and the development of a regional trauma network. Despite a well structured plan for regionalization and consultation with providers prior to design, the plan has been met with substantial public resistance. Patients and providers accustomed to local services are disappointed by the plan and perceive the changes as a loss of service within their local community, while disregarding the regional benefits and improvement of care that will result from the planned consolidation.

Regionalization of the neonatal and perinatal services has been supported by the State of Tennessee Perinatal Advisory Committee for decades. Multiple peer reviewed papers support the improvement in outcomes with increasing volumes of complex patients. The American Academy of Pediatrics supports a decrease in mortality in neonatal units averaging over 15 patients. The planned consolidation allows for one NICU with a projected census of 35 patients, while closing a unit with an average census of less than eight patients. Undoubtedly, this shift in patient volumes will allow for demonstrable improvements in outcomes. As a practicing Maternal-Fetal Medicine physician and prior Medical Director of the Northeast Tennessee Regional Perinatal Center, I have seen first hand the benefits of NICU volumes on outcomes. Many neonates lives have been saved from NICU consolidations leading to an increase in skill levels, and improved outcomes.

As the Dean of the Quillen College of Medicine, it is vital that I safeguard our mission to educate future physicians with an emphasis on primary and rural care. Likewise, East Tennessee State University was founded with the singular purpose of improving the lives for the people of the region. For both of these core missions to be accomplished, a strong Healthcare partner is imperative. Ballad Health must find operational efficiencies to improve it's ability to invest in needed services, research, and population health. Commitments made under the certificate of public advantage (COPA) outline expansions in pediatric care, including pediatric emergency rooms in Bristol and Kingsport, and the formation of a pediatric trauma center at Niswonger Children's Hospital. These investments in the health of the region will improve the lives of all. The ongoing and increasing partnership of East Tennessee State University with Ballad Health improves patient care and outcomes throughout the region and will be further strengthened by proposed changes.

Office of the Dean

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Change is difficult for all involved, but is often necessary. Ballad Health has thoughtfully planned changes to the regional care of patients in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Using an evidence based approach and involving local partners, they aim to improve the health of the region as never before. The leadership of Ballad has made the difficult decision to upset some to improve the outcomes of many, and should be supported. As both a practicing physician whose patients are impacted by this change, and a Dean whose students and resident physicians will experience the impact, I fully endorse their plan to consolidate neonatal ICU services to Niswonger Children's Hospital. I am happy to discuss my thoughts if I can be of any help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William A. Block, Jr.', written in a cursive style.

William A. Block, Jr., MD, MBA, FACOG  
Dean of Medicine (Interim)  
Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology  
Quillen College of Medicine  
East Tennessee State University