

St. Elias Specialty Hospital: Bridging the Gap for Long-term Care Patients in Alaska

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Teaming up with the Alabama-based specialty health care provider Bridgecare Hospitals, Providence Health Systems opened St. Elias Specialty Hospital in Anchorage, Alaska in December, 2006. Designed to provide the state's first long-term acute care, St. Elias fills a gap in Alaska's fast-growing health care industry according to CEO Chad Carpenter. While most hospitals have limited intensive care facilities, St. Elias is designed specifically for patients with serious issues, needing around the clock care, with stays averaging twenty-five days or more. "We act as a pressure relief valve; we take patients from ICU's directly into our hospital," says Carpenter. "That allows them to keep their doors open and that's critical."

The 65,000 square foot hospital is located at 4800 Cordova Street in Anchorage and was built at a cost of nearly \$24 million. The sixty-bed, extended stay hospital features an ideal environment for patients recovering from serious medical disorders which preclude them from being admitted for typical inpatient rehabilitation in other long-term facilities. Many patients have complex medical conditions

complicated by diabetes, hypertension, renal failure, complex pulmonary disease, and morbid obesity. An interdisciplinary team directs each patient's recovery and includes case management, nursing and nutritional services, physical, occupational and speech therapy, and social services. An on-site 1,000 square foot physical therapy gym is utilized to increase strength and mobility which supports patients in their often long and slow recovery process.

In delivering specialized care for non-critical patients requiring 24-hour assistance, St. Elias supports the other regional hospitals in Alaska by freeing up much needed space in emergency rooms and ICU's. These patients typically have medical needs that are too extensive for a lower level of care and their potential for rehabilitation is compromised by acute medical issues. Not only does St. Elias provide the necessary care these patients require, having a long-term facility also makes it easier on them and their families, says Carpenter. With its central Alaskan location, St. Elias allows patients to recover near their homes, encouraging family participation and reducing stress which can slow down the healing process.

Designed to support longer stays,

the rooms at St. Elias are larger than typical hospital rooms. Each features picture windows, a private bath and cable TV. Meals are designed to provide wholesome nutritional support for specialized-needs patients and a full-service cafeteria is available for visitors. Families are encouraged to visit and overnight stays can be accommodated with physician approval. Most medical services such as X-rays and blood tests are administered in the rooms so patients aren't required to be transported to different labs. In addition, special accommodations are also available for morbidly obese patients; these bariatric suites feature extra wide, reinforced beds and "hover mats" which enable easy transfer of patients from bed to a gurney.

The long-stay patient isn't the exception at St. Elias, it's the rule and according to Carpenter the mission of his facility is to "get patients excited about getting better." With daily physician visits, 24-hour nursing care, in-house dialysis, telemetry, ventilator care and weaning, and case management, St. Elias aims to help each patient reach the highest level of wellness and recovery.

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