

spotlight

St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center Carroll, Iowa



Amid the trees, farmsteads, and rolling hills of Carroll, Iowa, resides St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center, a full-service oncology-hematology hospital-based department of St. Anthony Regional Hospital, offering radiation and medical oncology, hematology, and infusion therapy services. While faith-based healthcare organizations are common, this cancer center's dedication to providing high-quality care to its small, rural community makes it unique and serves as a foundation for constant innovation. A facility planning evaluation that occurs every decade is emblematic of this philosophy. Following the most recent strategic facility evaluation in 2011, St. Anthony Regional Hospital's goals for the future included building a new cancer center—one equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment.

The groundbreaking for the new cancer center was in April of 2019, and the building was completed in December 2020. The project cost was estimated at \$19 million. Of that amount, the Building Hope Capital Campaign raised \$11 million through charitable donations. "That is what people in Iowa do. They stand behind what is going to benefit them and their neighbors," said Lori Pietig, MHA, CT, RT(R), director of Cancer Services at St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center. "Every dollar mattered, and every donor was acknowledged for their commitment to improving care across west central Iowa."

Redesigning with Patients in Mind

The level of commitment demonstrated by donors is likely a result of the quality of care the cancer center and its staff have

provided to patients for the last 30 years. "We are not treating a group of individuals; we are treating our family, neighbors, and former schoolteachers," Pietig said. "Having a recognizable face makes a difference to our patients. They have a sense of connection."

The relationship St. Anthony Regional Hospital developed with its community ensured the patient perspective was included when designing the new cancer center. "None of our current [treatment] areas had windows and natural light," Pietig said. "The existing patient care spaces were very small and cramped. The patient care needs exceeded the space available in our current setting." A study of the Carroll County region also served as a source of inspiration for the new center. "We wanted to see what cancer [care] would look like in the future," Pietig explained.





Upon the study's conclusion, St. Anthony Regional Hospital found it needed to update its equipment. "Our linear accelerator was at the end of its life, and we did not have a secondary vault," Pietig said. The study also revealed the need to expand the health system's cancer service line. "The staff saw an increase in patient volumes because other local facilities were cutting back on cancer services, increasing patient volumes in the specialty clinic that was used by multiple providers," Pietig said.

The Cancer Center Today

The first floor is home to the radiation oncology clinic. The clinic is staffed by a radiation oncologist, registered nurse, dosimetrist, and three radiation therapists who are all employed by the hospital. The medical oncology and infusion therapy clinics can be accessed on the second floor. The infusion therapy clinic is staffed by nine registered nurses, with most being oncology certified. The medical oncology and hematology clinics are staffed by three oncologists, each of whom are contracted by the hospital. They also employ the services of a registered nurse, certified medical assistant, phlebotomist, and two licensed nurse practitioners, who are employed by the hospital.

"Our staffing model allows for consistency but also flexibility when dealing with ever changing patient volumes," Pietig said.

"We also cross train staff throughout the cancer center to assure coverage for vacation and sick leave."

On patients' recommendations, St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center created three infusion suite options in the cancer center. Within the infusion space, there are thirteen chairs in a communal infusion setting, three chairs in a semi-private space, and two in the private rooms. "This allows patients to choose the setting they best see fit to receive treatment that day," Pietig said. Staff provide chemotherapy, immunotherapy, specialty injections, and blood transfusions in these infusion suites. Additionally, the nursing staff use portable computers to chart at the bedside—allowing them more time to be with patients.

The cancer center currently works with the St. Anthony Regional Hospital pharmacy team to support patient care needs. In the coming months, Pietig expects that the infusion suites' dedicated pharmacy will be fully operational. Following its launch, the pharmacy will be staffed by a full-time pharmacist and technician. "We have installed and are in the process of commissioning the Equashield® fully enclosed chemo mixing robot," Pietig said.

The cancer center's radiation oncology team offers IMRT, SBRT, EBRT, and radium Ra 223 dichloride injections. In addition, surgical oncology services are available for colon and breast cancer through a partner-

ship with local physicians who offer services on-site. "We also work with patients if surgical options are available closer to home," Pietig said.

With the new building and services came a new patient referral form, developed by the staff at the cancer center, which is shared with local providers. "This form outlines what [information] is needed for a referral. From the time of referral to appointment, we are looking at less than five business days," Pietig said.

Supporting the Whole Person

Every Friday morning, cancer center staff discuss the care plans for each new patient, as well as their individual needs—both physical and spiritual. "Our facility was founded by Father Joseph Kuemper who had a vision, and he enlisted the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration to build a hospital in Carroll," Pietig said. "Being a Catholic hospital, the spiritual aspect of care has been a part of us since the first brick was laid on the ground." St. Anthony Regional Hospital's current chaplain has been part of the care team for five years, and the facility also enlists help from retired priests and community members to provide spiritual guidance to those in need organization-wide.

Dedicated expansion of the supportive care services offered was a major focus when developing the new cancer center.



“The nurse navigator, social work, financial navigator, and dietitian [positions], those were areas we had opportunity to expand, and we have been able to add them as we grow.” Today, St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center employs a full-time nurse navigator, social worker, financial navigator, and a part-time dietitian. Through a partnership with contracted medical oncology physicians, patients can also meet with a genetic counselor and receive genetic testing. Further, patients can access physical therapy, in-person or virtual support groups, as well as enrollment in clinical trials.

Pietig considers herself lucky because most of the patients being treated by St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center staff have insurance coverage. However, if they are underinsured, patients are referred to the patient finance department to evaluate support options from the hospital's charity program.

Unique Challenges to Rural-Based Healthcare

St. Anthony Regional Cancer Center does not currently have any accreditations, but it

is one of five oncology programs enrolled in a five-year grant program that is funded by the National Cancer Institute and the University of Iowa. This opportunity is designed to help rural cancer centers in Iowa achieve Commission on Cancer accreditation. In 2021, the cancer center treated patients from 17 counties and 4 states—a

significant expansion of its catchment area. “We have a saying here at the center: ‘We, as caregivers, take more from our patients than we can ever give back to them.’ We are humbled that each day they choose St. Anthony,” Pietig said. “It is with great pride that we serve the patients that walk through our doors.” 

