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ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE STRENGTHENS ALABAMA'S WORKFORCE

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Access to quality health care has become a business issue as much as a public health one.

East Alabama Health in Opelika is responding with the opening of East Alabama Medical Center North, expanding psychiatric services in east Alabama and helping meet the growing demand for behavioral health care across the region.

Located on East Alabama Health's North Campus, the 54,000-square-foot facility expands access to inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care while addressing one of Alabama's most pressing health care challenges.

The hospital increases East Alabama

Health's inpatient psychiatric capacity from 28 to 40 beds and includes specialized units for adults, adolescents and children. It also houses Alabama's only long-term adolescent psychiatric unit, where patients can continue working toward a high school diploma through an onsite accredited school while receiving treatment.

The expansion comes as one in five Alabamians experiences a mental health episode each year.

Laura Grill, president and CEO of East Alabama Health, said the project grew from an increasing need throughout the region.

"The growing demand for psychiatric patient services in our region had outgrown our bed capacity," Grill said. "We had patients waiting for a bed to open in one of our three emergency departments, sometimes for longer

than a day. We wanted a facility that reduces the stigma around seeking help—one that feels like healing, not confinement."

While EAMC North expands access to behavioral health care, Grill said the project also illustrates the broader challenges facing hospitals across Alabama.

"The most difficult challenge health systems are facing today is a simple mathematical imbalance regarding the growing costs of delivering health care and the declining reimbursement for services," Grill said. "There are secondary challenges as well, such as an ongoing workforce shortage nationally, but the bottom line continues to be pressure on our balance sheets."

Those financial pressures extend beyond individual hospitals and into Alabama's economy. As communities



grow, health systems must expand services, recruit physicians and invest in workforce development while continuing to provide access to care in rural communities where hospitals face increasing financial strain.

More than 10 Alabama hospitals have closed over the past 15 years, and others remain at risk.

Grill said East Alabama Health has worked alongside neighboring communities to help preserve access to care through management partnerships and Rural Emergency Hospital transitions in Valley, Clay County and Bullock County.

Rather than expanding its footprint, the health system's focus is creating sustainable regional solutions that keep health care local. The connection between health care and economic development is becoming increasingly clear.

"You can't separate a healthy economy from a healthy workforce," Grill said. "Employers depend on people showing up with the ability to do their best work, and untreated health conditions are among the leading drivers of lost productivity, absenteeism and turnover."

Companies considering where to locate or expand evaluate the strength of local health care systems.

"Businesses depend on a healthy workforce, and a healthy workforce depends on access to high-quality health care," said Helena Duncan, president and CEO of the Business Council of Alabama. "Health systems like East Alabama Health are essential partners in Alabama's economic success because they help businesses recruit, retain and care for the workforce that keeps our economy moving."

And Alabama's business community has an important role to play in strengthening the state's health care system.

"Business support in health care is critical," Grill said. "It starts with the coverage and benefits they offer their own employees—full-coverage health plans, employee assistance programs and a workplace culture that promotes health and wellbeing are a great start."

Businesses can support residency and workforce training programs, invest philanthropically through hospital foundations and advocate for sustainable health care funding.

Take the Alabama Rural Hospital Investment Program, for example.

Established through HB86 during the 2025 Legislative Session, the program allows individuals and businesses to receive a dollar-for-dollar state income



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tax credit for donations made to eligible rural hospitals.

EAMC-Lanier Rural Emergency Hospital in Valley reached its \$750,000 funding cap within one month of the program opening in 2026.

"When the business community treats health care as a shared responsibility—and as essential to the economy as roads, education or broadband—everyone benefits," Grill said. "A healthy Alabama is good for business, and a strong business climate is good for the health of our communities." Investments from businesses, community partners and policymakers

are helping position East Alabama Health for long-term growth as one of Alabama's fastest-growing regions continues to expand.

East Alabama Health's focus over the next decade will be on growing alongside the communities it serves while keeping high-quality care close to home.

"I see us continuing to grow right alongside one of the fastest-growing regions in Alabama and providing the high-quality, meaningful health care services that our community and region deserve," Grill said. "Ten years out, I hope people look at East

Alabama Health and see a system that didn't just keep pace with a booming community, but helped make the area a place where families and employers choose to put down roots because the care is here."

As Alabama continues to compete for jobs, talent and investment, the partnership between the business community and health care providers like East Alabama Health will remain essential to building healthier communities, a stronger workforce and an economy positioned for long-term growth.

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