



# COLBY FREE PRESS

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CHRISTINA BERINGER/Colby Free Press

Don Morton of Thomas County Emergency Medical Services showed off the many changes to one of two ambulances housed in Colby. The crew has reorganized the trucks and revamped

their supply bags. He said they used to focus on trauma emergencies. Now, the bags are equipped to handle a broader range of minor and major incidents.

## Emergency director steps in to keep county's state license

By Christina Beringer

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In just two months, the new director for emergency medical services has rebuilt and reorganized operations and has staved off a threat to the county's state license due to complaints filed in the spring of 2011.

Director Joe Hickert said that long before he was hired, several anonymous complaints had been filed with the Kansas Board of Emergency Medical Services. He said the incidents were investigated by the board, which decided the complaints were justified.

"Thomas County was told that EMS would be shut down if they didn't get anything done (to resolve the problems)," said Hickert, "so the commissioners began looking for a new director, and when they hired me, EMS was given

60 days to make changes."

It took commissioners about 2 1/2 months to find a qualified director to replace the former director, who resigned in the middle of September. Hickert was hired just after Thanksgiving and was briefed on the situation.

Hickert said he could not give out details about the complaints, except that they involved "aspects of patient care that were mishandled." He was charged with reshaping the organization in just two months.

To meet the state's Feb. 2 deadline, Hickert said, he began rewriting the organization's protocols manual, developed training classes for volunteers, met with area organizations to recruit new volunteers, reorganized the equipment on the ambulances and in the "go bags" and even offered his arms up for demonstrations on how to insert IV's.

His work paid off. After the new director,

Thomas County Attorney Kevin Berens and commissioners Ken Christiansen and Paul Steele attended a meeting Feb. 2 in Topeka, they received a letter from the state board, signed by investigator Jerry Cunningham:

"After reviewing all of the information (provided in response to the board's Dec. 1 request), the committee determined that Thomas County EMS complied fully with the committee's request. The committee moved to accept the reorganizational plan submitted and closed the case without further action.

"Mr. Hickert, I personally want to commend you and your EMS personnel, Thomas County commissioners, Dr. (Brewster) Kellogg, Kevin Berens, and the Citizens Medical Center staff, for the professional manner in which you addressed this difficult situation.

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## First phases of trails set for summer

By Steve Haynes

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A group planning a system of walking and biking trails for Colby kicked off a plan to complete the first phases by summer, totaling 2.2 miles of trails, connecting the high school, water park, college and shopping areas at a public meeting Thursday.

Sue Evans, a co-coordinator of the effort with the Thomas County Healthy Communities Coalition, said the group's vision is to make Colby "the most walkable community in Kansas."

Evans and co-coordinator Diann Gerstner of Thomas County Extension led a presentation for about 30 people at the Pioneer Memorial Library.

About a year ago, she said, the group began looking for a place to put a walking trail. The city stepped forward and offered the land around its new aquatic park, and Colby farmer Lon Frahm offered to donate \$25,000 and also to match \$25,000 in public donations.

With that money collected and a \$20,000 gift from the Thomas County Wellness Committee, she said, the coalition has the money to finish the first phase of its plans, about half a mile of concrete trails around the new pool. The money is with the Thomas County Community Foundation, she said, and construction should begin this spring on the Frahm Family Trail.

But the group's vision goes far beyond half a mile of trails, she said. And with some new partners and more support, the group is ready to expand with trails north and south along Franklin Avenue, connecting the high school and water park to neighborhoods to the north, east

along the south boundary of the college campus, and north into the campus and along Range Avenue to College Drive.

The city, she said, will complete sidewalks along College to complete a loop around the campus, and existing sidewalks on campus will connect the north and south legs. That means adding the college and the Colby school district as partners, Evans said.

"The kids will have a way to walk to the pool," Evans said. "The college kids can ride their bikes out to Dillon's to shop, and beyond."

It'll take another \$100,000 to complete the paving on all four phases (not counting the city's sidewalks on College), she said.

"The first check is there, \$15,000 to honor the 'Walkers and Talkers' group," she said, adding that tax-deductible donations can be made any time through the foundation. The agency has set up a Colby Walking Trail Fund, plus an endowed fund to earn money for future maintenance needs, and a fund for a \$25,000 Healthy Communities planning grant, said Executive Director Melinda Olson.

Evans said she other leaders had been on a "grant-writing frenzy," securing a \$35,000 trail grant from the Sunflower Foundation. They also have a \$88,000, two-year Achieve grant for planning healthy community initiatives which goes beyond walking trails.

A core group has been for training in Atlanta, she said, and will go back. Initiatives could include "healthy workplace" efforts and others aimed at diet and obesity.

She told the group Thursday that support from contractor Mike Woofter has been vital to

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## Citizens help assess county health needs

By Sharon Friedlander

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Prenatal care. Low birth weights. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Heart disease. Bacterial pneumonia. Are these issues being adequately addressed in Colby and Thomas County? Are our most important issues mental health-care, specialty services, uninsured residents and lack of dentists?

Citizens Medical Center, to comply with new Internal Revenue Service regulations for non-profit hospitals, must do assessments of medical care every three years with yearly updates beginning in 2012.

The hospital enlisted the help of the Thomas County Health Department and asked our community to help them evaluate the current needs of our county.

A Community Health Needs Assessment survey was mailed out to residents to give them a chance to share their views of health needs and services in our county. Almost 30 percent of the surveys were returned for evaluation, a relatively high rate of return.

On Monday, a town hall type participation luncheon was held

at City Limits to give a preliminary overview of the data collected. Vince Vandehaar of VVV Research and Development of Olathe was on hand to present information to an audience of health care professionals, civil service employees, a minister, a doctor, representatives of various organizations in Thomas County and other interested parties.

Those attending were invited to express their views on these healthcare issues and to have round table discussions on what we have to be proud of in our community and county and where we feel improvements could be made.

After a brief discussion of the preliminary results the audience was asked to share what they believed there was to be proud of about health care in the county.

They were then asked to give views on some of the problems needing to be addressed in the near future to ensure residents have the best medical care available.

Each table was asked to share their concerns on what they saw as lacking in Thomas County. Each table was to bring up one problem, different from any previously mentioned concerns.

After all had covered their concerns, any other issues that should



SHARON FRIEDLANDER/Colby Free Press

Virgil Jones of Farm Credit of Western Kansas contemplated which needs he thought were most important to the community Monday at the Community Health Needs Assessment Luncheon

at City Limits Convention Center. Each person in attendance used green stickers to vote for the four most important health needs for Colby.

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