

# **An open letter to the community from Unity Center for Behavioral Health**

September 11, 2018

The safety and well-being of patients and staff at Unity Center for Behavioral Health is our number one priority. The very reason Unity Center was created was to dramatically raise the bar on the quality of care provided to those in our community suffering from mental illness. Our staff and leadership care deeply about the lives we touch and the people we serve. That's why the work underway to remedy the areas where we have fallen short is so important.

In May of 2018, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) responded to safety concerns raised by Unity Center staff. OHA began an exhaustive onsite review of our environment of care. We opened our doors to OHA and have been actively engaged with the agency in its process. We take our staff's concerns and OHA's investigation seriously and are focusing intensely on fixing the problems at hand.

Significant progress has been made. We've increased staffing. We've modified both our physical environment and our practices. We've removed items that were identified as safety hazards. We spent three full days supporting our staff with a refresher training course on policies and procedures. We've improved our documentation of patient care and medication administration. We are

committed to remedying each and every area of concern identified in the OHA's Statement of Deficiencies. And we are not done yet.

Truly, we are grateful to Unity Center staff who have raised concerns. We are grateful to the OHA for its extensive outside review. We are grateful to the reporters who have asked tough questions. We are grateful even to our loudest critics. And we are grateful to our community partners for their close monitoring of our progress, and for their support. We are better today because of them. We encourage our employees, who are our eyes and ears in every patient care setting, to continue to contribute to our vigilant observation and documentation of safety conditions at Unity Center.

**The need for access to the care provided at Unity cannot be overstated.**

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, [one in five](#) people has a mental health issue, and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports that an estimated 50 percent of all Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime. The nonprofit [Mental Health America](#) in a study last year ranked Oregon as having among the highest rates of people suffering from mental illness and the poorest access to counseling, care and treatment.

Portland-area hospital emergency departments are often underequipped to treat mental health emergencies. Before Unity Center, long wait times and limited access to specialized psychiatric care meant patients didn't get the immediate help they needed. In too many cases, patients were leaving our

hospitals no better off than when they arrived. Without a clear plan of action, patients' conditions can worsen, sometimes leading to chronic medical conditions, homelessness or incarceration. Something needed to change. That's why Unity Center opened its doors in January 2017. Since then, our mission remains unchanged: to provide immediate psychiatric care and a long-term path to recovery for people experiencing a mental health crisis. We treat patients with compassion and dignity, acknowledging the underlying trauma contributing to a patient's mental illness, helping them find relief and stabilization, and creating a long-term treatment plan.

**We are 100% committed to the success of Unity Center.**

In just over 18 months, Unity Center has served more than 7,000 people in desperate need of help. We hear from patients and families who tell us how Unity Center has made a difference in their lives. But our journey has not been without hurdles. Unity Center is the first mental health initiative of its kind in the region. Despite the collective depth of experience of our hospital partners in treating patients with mental health issues, there have been unforeseen challenges in adapting our policies and procedures to an environment that serves the volume of severely ill psychiatric patients that we have at Unity Center.

Nonetheless, we are unwavering in our commitment to the success of Unity Center. Our community is counting on us. Our patients are counting on us. Unity Center staff, who are dedicated to the patients we serve, need us to be

successful. We cannot go back to the cycle of suffering and inadequate care that those among us living with mental illness have endured.

We will leave no stone unturned in seeking opportunities to improve the safety and environment of care for patients and staff at Unity. These efforts will continue long after the OHA investigation is concluded.

Thank you for reading this letter and allowing us to share our story with you directly. We have created a website at [www.unityfacts.org](http://www.unityfacts.org) to share information and updates on our progress as the OHA process continues. We invite you to be a part of our journey of growth, learning, improvement and service to those in our community suffering from mental illness.

Sincerely,

Trent Green, President of Legacy Emanuel Medical Center and Unity Center for Behavioral Health on behalf of the Unity Center Board of Managers.