

Southeastern Health
Dr. Thomas Walden's Presentation

Good afternoon. I am Dr. Thomas Walden, Radiation Oncologist for the Gibson Cancer Center of Southeastern Health.

I am in support of the petition Southeastern Health will be filing on behalf of Robeson County residents and would like to address some of the needs that prompted the decision to file. As chair of Southeastern's Cancer Committee and as an established provider in the Robeson community, I am involved on a daily basis with these services and can attest to the capabilities and needs associated with this program.

As discussed previously by my colleague Reid Caldwell, the Gibson Cancer Center has provided radiation therapy services to the region since 1995 and remains the only cancer treatment facility in Robeson County. The center has one linear accelerator that is currently being operated well above the 6,750 ESTV threshold standard set forth by the state. If we annualize our ESTVs for the months of suspended operation due to the facility fire, we have operated above the established 6,750 ESTV threshold for the past four years. In 2017 we performed nearly 9,000

ESTVs, more than 2,000 procedures above the threshold. To meet this high demand, the center has extended treatment times past normal hours to accommodate our patients' needs. Unfortunately, because many of our patients are weak and in some discomfort, scheduling treatments into the night is not in the patients' best interest. Radiation therapy treatments often continue on a daily basis for six or seven weeks, which means our patients, particularly those that are older, need a more reasonable schedule to be able to come and go from the Cancer Center. With the growing number of patients who are seeking treatment at the Cancer Center, we recognize that other alternatives must be considered.

Having access to only one accelerator in Robeson County increases our patients' risk for disrupted or foregone treatments due to limited capacity or equipment failure from high use. As demonstrated by the fire incident rendering our accelerator inoperable from June 2015 to March 2016, our patients had to receive treatments outside of Southeastern Health, primarily at Cape Fear Valley Health System or Scotland Memorial Hospital. While our team worked diligently to coordinate care for radiation therapy patients outside of our facility, continuity of care was disrupted. Since all accelerators statewide are not beam-matched

(that is, contain the same or similar dosimetric characteristics) a patient's treatment plan must be adjusted prior to continuing their treatments. Patients have to redo CT simulations, physics and dosimetry testing, a process that can take anywhere from 7 days to 2 weeks for the patient to be cleared for treatment. This interruption in radiation therapy can be harmful to the patient and adds to the overall cost of healthcare services. With the approval of Southeastern Health's petition for an additional accelerator in Robeson County, we can work to ensure the second accelerator is beam-matched to the existing accelerator, thereby mitigating delays in patient treatment when an accelerator is down.

Moreover, from a cultural perspective, our community is often reluctant to seek treatment under any circumstance; that cultural perspective is exacerbated when they have to travel outside of Robeson County for that care. Our patients have a strong sense of community and cultural identity that manifests in a trust factor unique to Robeson County; our patients are more likely to stay within their home town or with their primary provider than migrate to outside facilities for treatment. Further, as mentioned by my colleague, our patients are burdened with socioeconomic challenges such as insufficient funds or inadequate means of transportation. When taken together, these circumstances

compound the barriers our patients face in trying to receive and access quality health care services. To continue to meet the growing demands of our community and to ensure continual and safe care to our patients, we need another linear accelerator.

I believe acquiring a second accelerator in Robeson County is the most effective way of meeting the radiation therapy needs of the patients we serve. I vigorously support these efforts to do just that.

Thank you...