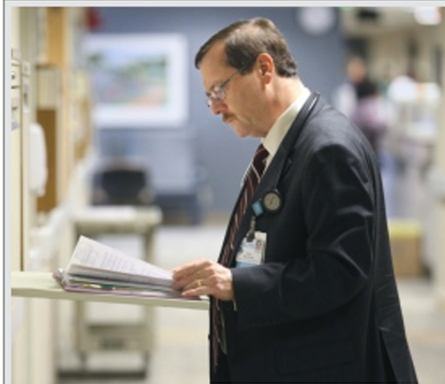


## Akron General Medical Center contracts with national company for physician coverage

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Dr. David Miller, is switching from the current Akron General Hospitalists to Sound Physicians, a group that will be providing hospitalist coverage to AGMC. (Phil Masturzo/Akron Beacon Journal)

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Akron General Medical Center is contracting with an Ohio-based subsidiary of a large national physician group to provide around-the-clock doctor coverage for hospitalized patients.

Effective next week, Akron General is switching to Sound Physicians of Ohio for its hospital-based physicians, known as hospitalists.

The parent company, Sound Physicians of Tacoma, Wash., employs about 1,000 doctors who provide care at roughly 100 hospitals in 23 states, including seven other Ohio hospitals in the Columbus, Cincinnati and Springfield areas.

"We've combined the necessary scale of a large physician practice focused on inpatient care, improving quality and lowering cost, with an in-house performance management organization," said Dr. Robert Bessler, Sound Physicians' founder and chief executive officer.

Akron General has been contracting with a local physician group, Akron General Hospitalists, for around-the-clock hospitalist coverage.

All 12 Akron General Hospitalists doctors have signed contracts to become employees of Sound Physicians of Ohio and continue working at the medical center, Bessler said.

### How it works

The hospitalist specialty began in the mid-1990s and has since been embraced by the majority of hospitals nationwide.

Hospitalists, typically trained in internal medicine, tend to other doctors' patients after they've been admitted to the hospital and then turn care back over to the patients' regular doctor after discharge.

According to an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, more than 30,000 hospitalists staff about 70 percent of U.S. hospitals.

The trend has been driven by increased pressures to improve quality and safety, limits on resident physician hours, good patient outcomes and increased support from community-based primary-care doctors, who have limited time to visit their hospitalized patients, according to the article.

Summa Health System in Akron has several hospitalist groups that practice within its hospitals in the region but contracts with Inpatient Medical Services in Fairlawn for 24-hour coverage, according to a spokesman.

About half the patients admitted to Akron General are cared for by a hospitalist, said Dr. David Peter, the medical center's chief medical officer. The others are managed by their primary-care doctor or the hospital's medical service.

### Offers advantages

Sound Physicians stood out because of the company's strong information technology and commitment to quality and training, Peter said.

"We're looking to take our care of the patients to the next level," Peter said. "The physicians we have are very, very good. But they didn't have the support around them that you need to provide the highest level of care."

Dr. David Miller, a hospitalist with Akron General since 2006, said he was impressed with the information technology Sound Physicians offers to help doctors track and improve efficiency and their patients' average length of stay and satisfaction with their care.

"It would have probably taken us at least 10 years if not longer and a whole lot of money to be able to get where we're able to get just by signing this contract and making use of the tools Sound already has," said Miller, who will be serving as chief hospitalist for the Akron campus of Sound Physicians.

"I believe that if we're practicing better, more efficient medicine, the patient is ultimately the one who's going to benefit the most," he said.

How idea started

Bessler, an emergency medicine physician who trained at MetroHealth Medical Center and the Cleveland Clinic, got the idea to start a hospital-based physician practice while working as an ER doctor at a community hospital in Washington state about 15 years ago. He noticed it was hard to find a community doctor to admit patients at times.

So he got three other doctors to join him to start a hospitalist group to take over care while patients are hospitalized.

By 2004, the company saw a growing demand for enhanced inpatient services nationwide and invested in information technology, training and developing standards of care to improve outcomes, Bessler said.

The average 30-day hospital readmission rate for patients cared for by Sound Physicians is 12 percent, compared to the national average of 18 percent, Bessler said.

The goal, he said, is "the kind of care you'd want for your mother."

In addition to staffing facilities with hospitalists, Sound Physicians also provides nurse coordinators who can help with discharge planning, follow-up appointments and family questions, he said. The nurses don't replace the hospital's staff nurses, who continue to provide direct patient care.

The hospitalists are under contract with the same insurance companies as the hospitals where they work to avoid billing issues, Bessler said. Sound Physicians bills for services the doctors provide to patients.

Akron General also is paying Sound Physicians an undisclosed stipend to provide around-the-clock doctor coverage, Peter said.

The contract with Sound Physicians is unrelated to a recently announced potential sale of Akron General Health System to for-profit hospital chain Community Health Systems of Tennessee in partnership with the Cleveland Clinic.

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