

St. Vincent Hospital

An Amazing Past, a Bright Future

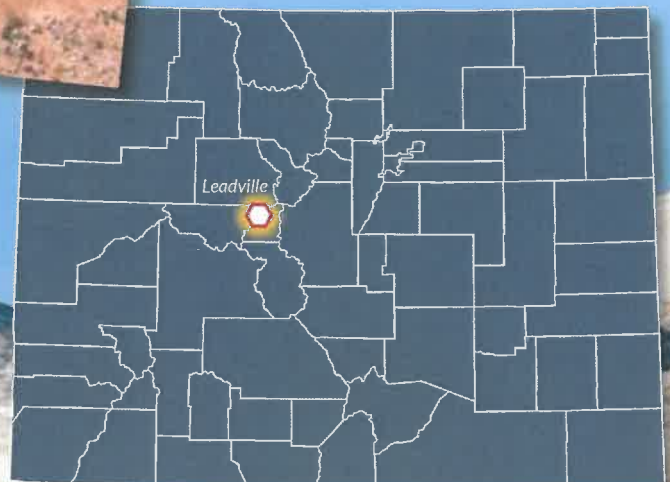
By Susan M. Thornton

It was a few days after Christmas in 1878 when three Sisters of Charity left Denver to open a hospital in Leadville, then the second-largest city in Colorado and the nation's highest city at 10,152 feet.

In 1878, Leadville's population was about 200. However, after the discovery of lead, gold, and silver in the area, within one year the population grew dramatically to 40,000.

A rollicking mining town, Leadville was reported to have four banks, 17 barbershops, 31 restaurants, 51 grocery stores, 120 saloons—but no hospital.

St. Vincent Hospital (top) is located in Leadville. The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth opened the St. Vincent Hospital in 1879 and ran it until 1972 when it was sold to a new community hospital district.



Building a Hospital

It took the Sisters of Charity three days to travel by stagecoach from Denver to Leadville. They were there to build a hospital at the request of local miners and the Catholic pastor, Father Henry Robinson.

Millionaire and Leadville mayor at the time—Horace A.W. Tabor—donated \$500 for the hospital, and within a month funds had been raised to build a 40 to 50 bed hospital. Opening in 1879, St. Vincent's Hospital treated approximately 1,000 patients in its first year.

In 1972 the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, sold the hospital to a new community hospital district, and the name was changed to St. Vincent Hospital.

An Aging Facility

Jump forward to 2014. By then, the St. Vincent General Hospital District was in trouble.

The hospital building, constructed in 1958, was old and boilers were failing, so the District's Board decided to go to the voters for a mill levy increase to build a new facility. The vote failed.

The hospital ended inpatient care and long-term care services and seemed on the verge of closing its doors.

Karen Onderdonk, Director of Community Development for the District, says closure would have been a significant blow to the residents of Lake County, who depend on the hospital for emergent care and ancillary care, such as labs and radiology. Without St. Vincent Hospital, Onderdonk says, people would

have to "drive over the hill" to Frisco or another community when facing a health crisis.

Determined District Board Stays the Course

But the District's five-member Board did not give up.

The Board went back to the voters again in 2015, and this time a mill levy increase of 3.625 mills passed with 60.9 percent of voters in favor.

Today the District's operating budget is approximately \$8.4 million. Of that, about 11 percent comes from the District's 9.106 mill levy.

The District has made interim improvements to the physical plant, has opened eight inpatient beds, and supports a 24/7 emergency room, ambulance service, laboratory, radiology/imaging, and other hospital services.

It has also increased staffing of 911 response so that a secondary ambulance crew is always at the ready. The District is the only ambulance-based emergency medical responder in Lake County.

Affiliation with Centura Health

The Board also sought a new partnership arrangement with Centura Health, which allows the District to participate in Centura Health's large purchasing group.

In addition, Centura Health provides oversight of the hospital's pharmacy and provides specialty services through telehealth (pulmonary, dermatology, concussion, cardiology, and stroke).

Need for a New, More Energy-Efficient Facility

But challenges remain. The existing hospital is old and in need of improvements, and the Board continues to evaluate whether or how a new, more energy-efficient facility could be built.

Gary Campbell, Chief Executive Officer of St. Vincent Hospital, says, "Our focus has been on stabilizing the District's financial picture, adding services, and providing excellent care, and now we are looking forward to a very positive future."

"I have never worked with a more committed and collaborative group of professionals. Lake County is lucky to have providers and healthcare professionals who care so deeply about their friends and neighbors."

The Right Care Right Around the Corner

Meanwhile, Onderdonk says the future for the hospital looks bright. Patient visits, radiology procedures, lab tests, ambulance runs and transfers, and inpatient care were all up strongly in 2017 over the previous year.

"We have turned the page on sustainability," Onderdonk says. "We were so near to closing," she adds. "We want people to know that we are *open*!"

Onderdonk uses the tag line, "The right care right around the corner" to describe the hospital and its services.

"We are here to assist our community in times of trouble and crisis. We plan to be here for the long run," she says.

SDA: Just an Email or Phone Call Away

Karen Onderdonk, Director of Community Development for St. Vincent General Hospital District, has warm praise for SDA. "We really appreciate the services and knowledge provided by SDA," she says. "We turn to SDA often for governance training assistance for our District. It's reassuring to know SDA is there and answers are just an email or phone call away."