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HEALTH CARE

Report shines light on 'troubling trend' at hospitals in Mass.

Many non-Steward facilities report negative operating margins

By Alison Kuznitz
 State House News Service

While the problems at Steward Health Care absorbed the spotlight over the past nine months, many other hospitals across Massachusetts continued to struggle

financially in what an industry group called a "deeply troubling" trend.

New financial data released by a state agency found that more than half of acute care hospitals in Massachusetts experienced negative operating mar-

gins through a significant portion of the fiscal year ending June 30.

Only 25 out of 58 hospitals reported positive operating margins during that span, and the statewide median operating margin fell to 1.1 points to -0.9%, the Center for Health Information

and Analysis said in a new report.

Even if you remove the bankrupt Steward hospitals — which after the data period ended either closed or were acquired by new owners — from that count, more than four out of 10 remaining hospitals were still in the red.

"Once again, CHIA's quarterly

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ALISON KUZNITZ — SHNS

A door is blocked off at Carney Hospital in Dorchester.

UTEC

REUNION MARKS 25 YEARS OF CHANGING LIVES, UNITY



AARON CURTIS — LOWELL SUN

From left, JuanCarlos Rivera, the vice president of the UTEC Board of Directors; UTEC CEO Gregg Croteau; and Luis Ortega. The three and many others were at UTEC on Warren Street in Lowell for the nonprofit's 25th anniversary reunion event on Oct. 5, 2024. The event brought together more than 100 former UTEC young adults.

'This reunion is not just about celebrating where we've been, but also recognizing where we're going'

By Aaron Curtis
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LOWELL » Standing at the entrance of UTEC on Warren Street on Friday evening, CEO Gregg Croteau reflects on the nonprofit's 25th anniversary. What began in 1999 as a space for teens at St. Anne's Church on Kirk Street, envisioned by a few young adults seeking refuge from gang violence, has now become a cornerstone of Lowell's identity, transforming countless young lives.

Croteau, who was hired by the original young adults in early 2000, smiles as he recalls their humble beginnings with just a \$40,000 city grant. Today, UTEC boasts an \$18 million budget, a testament to the organization's profound impact and growth.

"Twenty-five years is a huge milestone for us," Croteau said. Before he can continue, his thoughts are momentarily interrupted as he affectionately greets a familiar face walking through the door.

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COURTESY UTEC

Over 100 former UTEC young adults reunited at the organization's Warren Street gym in Lowell on Oct. 4, 2024 to celebrate UTEC's 25th anniversary. The event highlighted the growth, community, and individual journeys fostered by the organization over the years.

PUBLIC SAFETY

More state grants awarded to area police for road safety upgrades

Tewksbury, Tyngsboro, Townsend receive a combined nearly \$83K

By Aaron Curtis
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The Tewksbury, Tyngsboro, and Townsend police departments are the latest local agencies to announce that they received state grants, a combined total of \$82,662, aimed at enhancing road safety.

The Tewksbury Police Department received \$39,447, the Tyngsboro Police were awarded \$24,803, while the Townsend Police received \$18,412 through the Municipal Road Grant Program.

Tewksbury Police Chief Ryan Columbus said a portion of the funding will be used to pay for 24 local teen drivers to attend a crash prevention class through the nonprofit, In Control Family Foundation. The course, Crash Prevention 101: Introduction to Crash Prevention, educates drivers about year-round road hazards through a combination of classroom lessons, group exercises, and one-on-one driving instructions.

Additionally, the funding for the Tewksbury Police will be used to purchase a new pole-mounted speed radar sign and a data tracking device. According to the department, the funds will also provide overtime payments throughout the year to staff six targeted campaigns focusing on impaired operation, seat belt enforcement, distracted driving, and speeding.

Tyngsboro Acting Police Chief Shaun Woods announced that his department will allocate \$16,613 to fund traffic safety overtime patrols and \$8,189 to purchase traffic safety equipment, including speed measurement devices and mounted control signs.

Woods stated that the funds will enable the department to address "critical traffic safety concerns through enforcement initiatives, community outreach, and the purchase of essential safety equipment at no cost to the residents of Tyngsboro."

"By focusing on impaired driving, distracted driving, and seat belt compliance through campaigns like Click it or Ticket, and the winter and summer speed enforcement initiatives, we aim to

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PHOTOS COURTESY UTEC

Over 100 former UTEC young adults reunited at the organization's Warren Street gym in Lowell on Oct. 4, 2024 to celebrate UTEC's 25 anniversary.

Reunion

FROM PAGE 1

"How are you?" Croteau asks, beaming. "You look the same."

"Living my best life," the individual responds.

Croteau continues to greet several more familiar faces, all arriving on this Friday evening to celebrate UTEC's 25-year milestone with a reunion of former young adults who became part of the nonprofit. A press release highlights the organization's dedication to developing life skills, emphasizing that the event is a celebration of growth, community, and the powerful journey that began at UTEC over the past quarter-century.

Croteau said he expected about 150 people to attend Friday's celebration.

"This reunion is not just about celebrating where we've been, but also recognizing where we're going," Croteau said.

The event, filled with music from UTEC alumnus DJ Money, plenty of food and laughs, showcased the attendees as one big family.

Among those in the crowd was Jocelyn Rosado, who was 14 years old in 2004 and a student at Lowell High School when she



Former UTEC young adults, from left, Starsha Thompson and Jocelyn Rosado, during a celebration of UTEC's 25th anniversary at the nonprofit's Warren Street gym on Oct. 4, 2024. More than 100 former young adults reunited at the location to celebrate the nonprofit and their individual journeys.

began attending UTEC. She recalled facing challenges at home, having been placed with her grandparents after her mother went away. It was a life-changing event.

"I was so close to my mom," Rosado said. "I was a really quiet individual, really shy, so being separated from my mom changed my whole world. I felt so alone."

This feeling of isolation sparked a desire to become more social. She found solace at UTEC, where she met people who she dis-

covered could relate to her situation.

"I kinda felt like I was the only one until I was with young adults from UTEC," she said. "We all related to each other, we all understood each other, we mirrored each other."

Rosado now serves as a transitional coach for UTEC, a role dedicated to helping young people access essential resources. Rosado points out, "I'm giving them what I found here."

Melinda Tejada, who



From left, UTEC CEO Gregg Croteau, and Alberto Morales, a former young adult, celebrate the organization's 25th anniversary on Oct. 4, 2024.

also joined UTEC at the age of 14 during its inaugural year, found the same sense of unity she had been searching for at UTEC.

Tejada was just 11 years old when her mother passed away. Placed with a family member who she said was more interested in the financial benefits of raising her, Tejada felt anger toward the world, often lashing out and getting into trouble at school.

"I think coming here gave me that sense of unity, the sense of family I was

looking for," Tejada said. "It was a pivotal moment in my life where I could have taken the wrong path."

UTECE also opened doors to experiences Rosado might not have pursued otherwise. She recalled a memorable visit to Lowell City Hall, where she helped advocate for a grant and delivered her first public speech. UTECE additionally introduced her to creative writing and what she said was the Young Women's Group Project, which helped her forge connec-

tions with other females.

Now at 40 years old, Tejada states, "I have a good life." She has been a general manager for a storage company for the past eight years, a testament to the positive impact UTECE had on her life, said Tejada, a mother of a 19-year-old daughter.

Among the original young adults who set the wheels in motion in creating UTECE all those years ago, JuanCarlos Rivera, now the vice president of the organization's Board of Directors, stands with a sense of pride 25 years later. When asked if he expected the organization to achieve such growth, he said, "I always hoped it would."

"The idea for us is to ensure that after I'm gone and Gregg is gone, there's always a place for young people to go," Rivera added. "It's important to remember that every decade, young people have continued to make this happen."

Next on UTECE's agenda is the 25th Anniversary Gala, set to take place on Nov. 20 at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium. For more details about the event, visit utece.org/25thgala.

Follow Aaron Curtis on X, formerly known as Twitter, @aselahcurtis

Report

FROM PAGE 1

report is deeply troubling evidence of Massachusetts hospitals' financial challenges. With more than half of our hospitals operating in the negative and two-thirds of our hospital health systems consistently losing money on their operations, there is a very real threat to the sustainability of care that patients deserve," said Daniel McHale, a senior vice president for health care finance and policy at the Mass. Health and Hospital Association. "It is critical to recognize the immense — and growing — cost pressures hospitals are incurring to keep services accessible for everyone who

needs them."

The report comes as Massachusetts families and employers for years continue to struggle with the burden of rising health care costs. The average annual family premium grew from \$16,400 in 2012 to \$23,100 in 2021, and regulators have been warning in recent months that cost trends are headed in the wrong direction. Total health care spending in Massachusetts rose to \$67.9 billion in 2021, or about \$9,715 per person, according to CHIA.

Industry leaders view operating margins as the best measure of hospital financial health because total margin also includes other factors like investment income, contributions and asset sales that do not directly impact day-to-day care.

It's not the first time that the median operating margin has landed in the red. CHIA also reported statewide median operating margins below 0% through the same period of time in 2020 and 2022.

The report covered three quarters of data for many hospitals, most of whom typically begin their fiscal years on Oct. 1, and two quarters of data for Steward and Tenet hospitals, who count fiscal years differently.

At the time captured in the latest report, Steward was early in bankruptcy proceedings for all of its Massachusetts hospitals and had not yet announced it would shutter Nashoba Valley Medical Center in Ayer and Carney Hospital in Dorchester.

The CHIA data through June 30 showed Steward's hospitals all in the red, with operating margins ranging from -0.2% at Saint Anne's Hospital in Fall River, which has since been acquired by Lifespan, to -38.2% at Carney, which is closed. (The worst outlook was at Norwood Hospital, which has been closed since 2020 due to a flood and ran a -111% operating margin through June 30.)

Over the six-month span through June, Steward's hospitals collectively reported their expenses outpacing revenues by \$117.4 million.

But financial pressures were not limited only to the for-profit system that has been lambasted on both Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill.

Several non-Steward facilities ranked among the bottom 10 in operating margin, including Anna Jaques in Newburyport (-25.3% operating margin) and MetroWest Medical Center in Framingham (-11%).

Some facilities fared better. Baystate Medical Center in Springfield ran a 12% operating margin through June 30, the only facility to hit double digits by that measure.

The data show some variation, but for years, academic medical centers have performed the best. Over the past four-plus years, the median margin in that group has never dipped into the negative, ranging between a low of 0.2% and a high of 3.9%, CHIA data show. Those facilities tend to attract more patients on com-

mercial insurance, which often pays more than government-funded coverage.

All four other hospital types — teaching hospitals, community hospitals, community hospitals with a high share of public payers, and hospital health systems — have had at least one median operating margin in the red in that span.

The House and Senate this year approved a range of hospital oversight and financial reporting reforms, inspired both by the Steward Health Care crisis and broader industry pressure points. However, top House and Senate Democrats haven't been able to agree on a single approach and the legislation has been in limbo for more than two months since formal sessions ended for the term on July 31.



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