

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Printed on page A1

New LRMC Chief Digs In With People, Technology

By [Robin Williams Adams](#)
The Ledger

Published: Saturday, October 30, 2010 at 11:48 p.m.

LAKELAND | Lakeland Regional Medical Center President Elaine Thompson was due at a luncheon with the hospital foundation's senior advisory council Oct. 18 after having her picture taken.

En route, she stopped and stuck her head inside a small office in which an employee was collecting patient records.

"Hi. I'm Elaine,"

she said. "I'm your president."

That open, interested approach is what hospital regulars report seeing as Thompson, who assumed LRMC's top job in mid-September, learns her way around the multi-winged organization. Its 4,600 or so employees make LRMC Polk County's fifth-largest employer.

Earlier, Thompson knowledgeably discussed different computer systems with employees adjusting to the electronic health record system that debuted Sept. 1 in the Emergency Department and units treating patients before, during and immediately after surgery. She encouraged those employees to share their experiences with her.

"My No. 1 job is to let them see me, let them know me, let me listen to their concerns," Thompson, 54, said in an interview that day. "You have to hold an organization before you can contribute."

In doing that, she's been at the hospital at different times during the day and night, including walking the rounds at 1:30 a.m. one weekend with vice president and Chief Nurse Executive Janet Fansler.

"She comes across as down-to-earth and very approachable," Fansler said. "The staff were wowed by her. They liked what she had to say."

DIGITAL A PRIORITY

Former President Jack Stephens, who led LRMC for 26 years, was at the hospital's helm when the first phase of the electronic health record began. Now Thompson will lead the rest of LRMC into paperless-ness.

May 2012 is LRMC's target goal for having the entire hospital's patient data recorded electronically. Full hospital implementation would produce a single electronic health record for each hospital patient, a goal espoused by Thompson, various health groups and the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.



CALVIN KNIGHT | THE LEDGER
Lakeland Regional Medical Center's new President/CEO Elaine Thompson, PhD. greets Dr. John Lafferty as she tours the a Pre-Operation holding with RN Ever Glendenning and RN Julie Collins, Monday October 18th 2010.

LRMC expects to receive \$6.5 million in federal assistance over three or four years to help with that transition, Chief Information Officer Mary Ford said. The total price tag hasn't been calculated because there has been a series of projects leading to it.

Copyright © 2010 TheLedger.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.

The health-care industry lags in using information technology, Thompson said, calling health care "probably one of the most immature of all industries" in taking advantage of the benefits of information technology.

Delay in bringing hospitals into the electronic records era has delayed improvement efforts, the Pennsylvania native said. Those electronic records will become even more crucial as federal health reform forces doctors and hospitals to work together even more.

More accessible records will be good for patients and health workers, saving time and reducing the risk of errors, Thompson said.

That dovetails with another all-encompassing goal she listed among her priorities: Finding the best ways to promote quality, patient safety, patient satisfaction and good work.

She described LRMC's quality and patient satisfaction as "very good" now, but she said there's always room for improvement.

The way to keep improving, she said, is asking questions, such as "What can we do for patient satisfaction" and "How can we be sure the family is involved in the care?"

Employees have been helpful and responsive, Thompson said, although she joked that they notice her more when she puts on 3-inch heels. Thompson is slender and 5 feet, 8 inches tall. Stephens has broad shoulders and is 6 feet, 3 inches tall.

Ed Chambers, president of the union representing nurses and technical workers at LRMC, said he's heard good feedback about Thompson. He predicted United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1625 will have a "very, very good relationship" with her.

"She's going to feel her way around for a while," Chambers said. "We're going to be very patient and supportive."

Debbie Dease, an LRMC nurse and business agent for the union, said she's scheduled to meet with Thompson in December. So far, everyone she's talked with who has met Thompson "has a very positive impression of her," Dease said.

sense of COMMUNITY

Thompson said she didn't encounter any major surprises her first weeks on the job. She credits the recruiting process, openness from board members who hired her and Stephens' steady communication with her before and after she began at LRMC.

"There was such transparency," she said.

She received at least 1,000 pages of information about Lakeland Regional during the recruiting and interviewing period, Thompson said, and Stephens provided more after that.

"Jack was so incredibly welcoming to me," she said. "He was a sheer delight to work with."

She said she is impressed by the sense of community between LRMC and the city.

The intense support Lakeland Regional gets from business and community leaders - and LRMC's extensive involvement in the community - is something she hadn't

experienced in Pennsylvania, Thompson said.

Her previous hospital, 350-bed Lankenau Hospital in Wynnewood, Pa., is part of a system in the suburbs of Philadelphia, with a sister hospital less than five miles away, she explained.

That created a different type of relationship than in Lakeland, a one-hospital city in a county with four other one-hospital cities.

LRMC's size and array of services make it visible countywide. Thompson's intention, reflecting that of the board of directors who hired her, is to keep it that way.

Challenges in doing that include the economic climate, competition from doctor groups doing procedures once done exclusively in hospitals, and other hospitals seeking to expand the boundaries of their markets and the care they provide.

Finding the funds to do everything the hospital does now, and the things it needs to do, will be her biggest challenge, she said.

Another significant difference between LRMC and the hospital she came from is that she's the top executive at LRMC, guided by the volunteer board of directors. Although Thompson was president of Lankenau, she reported to the chief executive of the multihospital system, who then reported to an overall system board.

Her relationship with the LRMC board of directors has begun well, according to Dr. Mack Reavis, immediate past board president.

"She is everything we expected," Reavis said. "She's very intelligent and I think she's going to do a fine job for the hospital."

Thompson is meeting individually with each of the directors to establish personal relationships, Reavis said.

Reavis, director Bill Mutz and current board Chairman Dave Duncan also are meeting with her on a monthly basis to help her understand directions the board has taken and the reasons behind them.

The board hasn't released her salary, following standard hospital policy to only release executive compensation data in its annual federal tax filing.

Dave Thompson, her husband of more than 30 years, will join her in Lakeland. He is a CPA who was financial officer for a behavioral health organization. They have three daughters and own two English mastiffs.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Thompson has a different perspective than Stephens because she came from a clinical background.

She has dual 1977 bachelor's degrees in physical therapy and psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, a 1985 master's degree in physical therapy from Temple University, a 1990 doctorate in biomedical science from Drexel University and additional business preparation training from 1999-2001 at Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania.

She owned a physical therapy and sports rehabilitation center from 1985-1996 and worked in management from 1992-2000 with the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

From 2000-2006, she was with St. Luke's Hospital and Health Network of Bethlehem, Pa., starting as chief administrative officer for St. Luke's Hospital,

Allentown, a 150-bed acute care hospital. Then she was executive vice president and chief operating officer of St. Luke's four-hospital network. The network included a 500-bed hospital with a trauma program, neonatal unit and a cardiac surgery program, and three other hospitals with a total of 350 beds.

That gave her experience with a system comparable to that of Lakeland Regional. Lankenau, where she became president in 2006, is the academic flagship of multihospital Main Line Health System.

Stephens came from a more business, administrative background.

Thompson said a differing career path doesn't mean she plans to take the hospital down a vastly different path.

"It's not changing a direction," she said. "It's more adding a direction."

One direction did need to change quickly, however. Stephens had a large desk facing into the room. That made it difficult for Thompson to use her computer where she wanted it.

During the interview, she had a loaner desk, turned sideways, to improve her computer access.

Another indication of her more technology-oriented focus: She keeps an electronic calendar and uses a BlackBerry.

Stephens had 26 paper-filled engagement calendars, one from each of his years as president and chief executive.

In other areas, their desires for LRMC align perfectly.

"Our goal is to deliver the highest quality at the lowest cost," Thompson said. "That's going to be a wonderful journey over the next five to 10 years."

[Robin Williams Adams can be reached at robin.adams@theledger.com or 863-802-7558. Read her blog at robinsrx.blogs.theledger.com. Follow on Twitter @ledgerROBIN.]

This story appeared in print on page A1