

A dozen freestanding ERs with more to follow

UCHealth Makes “First Choice” for Community Emergency Care

By Tyler Smith

University of Colorado Health continued its inroads into Front Range communities last week with the announcement of a joint venture with [Adeptus Health Inc.](#), which operates freestanding emergency facilities in Colorado and Texas.



One of the First Choice facilities in the Denver area.

The deal, announced April 21, gives UCHealth majority ownership of the 12 [First Choice](#) freestanding emergency rooms Adeptus runs in Colorado. The partners plan to open two more freestanding facilities in the Denver area in the next couple of months, said Sarah White, director of system integration for UCHealth.

White said UCHealth and Adeptus will continue to evaluate the state to identify additional areas where services might be needed.

The First Choice facilities will be renamed UCHealth ER, and UCHealth will integrate its Epic electronic health record in all of them. White said UCHealth and Adeptus have started the integration planning to implement Epic in all the freestanding ERs.

Home crowd. For UCHealth, the joint venture is an opportunity to deliver care to patients closer to their homes, President and CEO Liz Concordia said in a statement.

“Providing the highest level of care, close to home for our patients, is one of UCHealth’s priorities,” Concordia said. “Partnering with Adeptus Health allows patients to receive care in a more convenient way, while also offering seamless transfers to hospitals for patients who need hospitalization.”

The joint venture allows UCHealth to compete in a market already dotted with freestanding ERs. HealthOne, SCL Health, and Centura Health all have freestanding ERs that pitch their appeal to patient convenience. SCL is also building “[micro hospitals](#)” that it bills as neighborhood-based alternatives to traditional hospital and physician office settings.



The interior of a First Choice facility.

Emergency experts. Given the market, it was necessary for UCHealth to broaden its presence in the community, said [Richard Zane](#), MD, chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine at the CU School of Medicine and UCHealth’s executive director of emergency services. But Zane stressed that the case for making Adeptus the system’s partner was “compelling.” He noted that all First Choice physicians are board-certified in emergency medicine and that every facility includes CT, X-ray, and ultrasound imaging,

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as well as on-site labs. All its nurses are emergency medicine-trained, Zane added.

First Choice also has a strong patient satisfaction record, said Zane, who added he decided to put the reputation to the test as a “secret shopper” in First Choice facilities in Texas and Colorado, posing in one instance as a patient with back pain. He described the compact buildings, each with six to 10 exam rooms, as clean and modern and completely free from scratches or frayed furniture.

“There was also clearly a consistent approach to customer service and care delivery,” Zane said. “I was greeted the same way each time. I knew they were formidable in terms of their medical and operational leadership.”



First Choice facilities include CT scanning equipment.

Zane said he was initially skeptical of the idea of forming a joint venture with existing freestanding ERs when it was originally proposed.

“It was very clear to me from the first day I came here that we would need to expand into the community, but I’d initially supposed we would build our own facilities,” Zane said. “It was a strategic decision to reach out.”

The strategy played out well, in Zane’s view. “Had we built our own, it wouldn’t have prevented Adeptus from building theirs – and now they aren’t our competitors.”

Separate strengths. The collaboration offers pluses to both sides, White said. Adeptus gets the benefits of the UCHealth brand, an entrée to electronic health records, and a connection to a strong payer network, she said. Patients who visit a UCHealth ER will get the same level of care they would receive at any other UCHealth facility, she added.

In a press release, Thomas S. Hall, chairman and CEO of Adeptus Health, called partnerships with health care systems “a key element of our strategic growth plan.” Joining forces with UCHealth, Hall added, helps Adeptus “to enhance access to the highest quality medical care in more communities.”

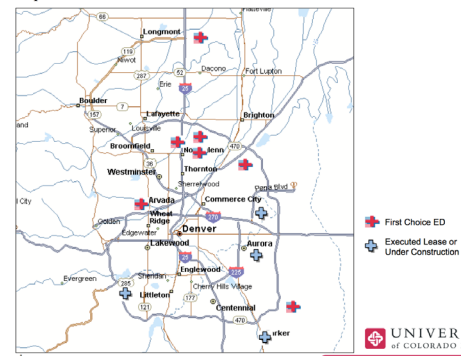


UCHealth gets a partner with a strong track record of success running freestanding ERs, not only in Colorado, but also in major markets in Texas, including Austin, Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio.

An Adeptus partnership with Dignity Health also opened the 16-bed [Dignity Health Arizona General Hospital](#) outside Phoenix earlier this year. Future plans for the UCHealth-Adeptus joint venture could include building two new hospitals, one each in the Colorado Springs and Denver metro areas, for acute- and follow-up care, White said. The hospitals would allow the UCHealth ER facilities to accept patients covered by government payers, including Medicare, Medicaid, and Tricare.

“This is all new turf for us,” White said. “It’s beneficial to align with an organization that is well respected in this field.”

Adeptus Health and First Choice Locations - Denver



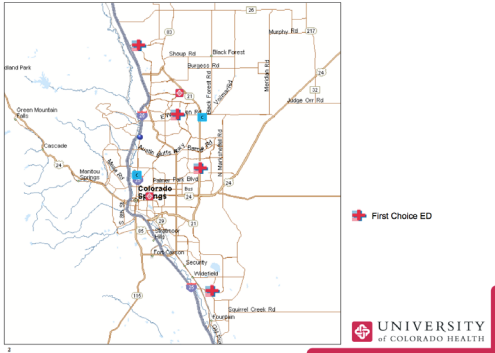
Red crosses show First Choice locations in and around the Denver area.

Freestanding ERs have been [criticized in Colorado](#) and elsewhere for the cost of care they provide. A [bill was introduced in 2014](#) that would have prohibited freestanding ERs from charging facility fees, as hospital-based ERs do, but it failed to make it out of the Colorado Senate.

Zane, however, brushed off the criticism, saying that the clinical capabilities of freestanding ERs, which exceed those of urgent care centers, increase their operating expenses.

“Limiting options and patient choice is not a strategy to control costs,” he said.

Adepts Health and First Choice Locations - Colorado Springs



First Choice locations in Colorado Springs, designated by red crosses.

Dan Weaver, media relations director for UCHealth, said the system also plans to work with commercial insurers to provide in-network coverage for as many patients who visit UCHealth ER facilities as possible.