

Build on specialties, strengths to bolster New Orleans as a health care destination, officials say

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To bolster New Orleans' profile as a health care destination, much work is needed to promote the city's burgeoning medical assets — like two new hospitals — but also its highly trained specialists involved in providing the care.

That was the gist of a panel discussion on taking advantage of the area's recent vogue as a tourist destination and its growing biomedical center.

In that regard, [New Orleans has a few things going for it](#), including the \$1.1 billion University Medical Center, which opened in 2015, and the \$1 billion Veterans Affairs Medical Center, scheduled to be fully up-and-running this year.

Plans also are underway for a \$100 million center to treat cancer patients using proton beam therapy, a controversial and expensive advanced treatment that proponents contend produces fewer side effects for patients than conventional radiation treatments.

What's more, New Orleans [hosted 10.5 million visitors last year](#), its highest number since 2004 and up nearly 7 percent from 2015, according to a recent study by the University of New Orleans. Those visitors spent roughly \$7.4 billion and on average stayed in the city for four nights.

But visitors who travel to New Orleans for medical care, if they can be enticed by the quality of the service, would almost certainly stay longer than that, officials say.

"If you can begin to serve the population outside of the region, outside of the state, outside of the country, then that's economic development as opposed to community development," said Michael Hecht, president and CEO of Greater New Orleans Inc., a regional economic development group.

To do that, he said, New Orleans could set itself apart by finding one or more medical specialties that could become "regionally, nationally, globally known" and almost synonymous with the city itself.

As an example, Hecht cited the Texas Medical Center in Houston, the largest medical complex in the world, which draws an average of 16,000 international patients each year.

"That's when you really begin to become an economic engine," he said.

In that sense, Ochsner Medical Center, the state's biggest nonprofit health care system, has distinguished itself as being among the best facilities in the nation, according to recent U.S. News and World Report rankings. The list put it among 61 hospitals in the U.S. that were ranked in at least four of 12 specialty categories.

Recent federal census data showed that the New Orleans area added more than 11,000 hospital jobs over the past decade, outpacing the rest of the country. That rapid growth rate was aided by Ochsner's recent expansions, which added more than 4,400 jobs in the past five years.

"Those are good-paying jobs that generate economic development for everyone around the city," said Warner Thomas, Ochsner Health System's president and CEO.

The panel discussion was held as part of Louisiana International Trade Week. The activities, sponsored by the World Trade Center of New Orleans, included workshops and industry panel sessions and other activities at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

Perhaps highlighting a tension between the allure of new facilities and Ochsner's longtime reputation in the industry, Thomas kept returning to the idea that in his view, it's having the right teams of trained professionals, rather than facilities, that should serve as the biggest catalyst for developing the sector.

"It's a lot of different things, and I think at the end of the day, it starts with people and building the team. It's not about buildings, it's about people, and we've worked for decades to build the right people and the right teams and the right structure," Thomas said.

Along with the city's strengths as a tourist draw, officials should "build on the brands that do have national and international reach, like Ochsner, and leverage them together," he said.

Noting that the region doesn't have "a big enough pipeline" to help train some medical disciplines, Thomas noted that Ochsner is in the process of developing a training program for physician's assistants with Xavier University.

"It's actually harder to get into a PA school in Louisiana than it is to get into medical school," he said, describing the Xavier initiative as "critically important as we continue to evolve the health care system."