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Nashville Business Journal

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Health factory of ideas: Entrepreneurs forming think tank

[Roy Moore](#)

Nashville Business Journal

Local officials often refer to Nashville as the Silicon Valley of health care, but Vanderbilt leaders and corporate leaders want to expand the city's persona into an idea factory and laboratory for testing solutions to the nation's health care problems.

The grand plan to create what's being described as a "think-and-act tank" stems from a proposal two years ago by then chairman Tommy Frist, who wanted the [Nashville Health Care Council](#) to have a greater impact. One of the first ideas to emerge was the creation of a think tank that could provide practical solutions to the nation's health care industry.

The goal appears workable. In its 10-year existence, the Health Care Council has matured into a trade group representing nearly 300 health care companies that call Nashville home.

Its members are the main drivers in the industry's biggest sectors, including hospitals, disease management and pharmacy benefits management.

Combining these businesses and bringing in those with experience in non-Nashville fields - life sciences, payers and government - the [Health Care Solutions Group](#) will set about tackling issues that impact the \$1.7 trillion industry.

"We've got a lot of health care expertise and talent in this town. We certainly don't represent all of the sectors of care, but we have a nucleus who understand health care inside and out," says David Osborn, executive director of the Solutions Group.

Together these corporate executives will comprise the Solutions Group's board of directors and nonresident fellows, who will take the ideas that emerge from the one to two summit meetings each year and turn them into actionable ideas.

Once conceived, the think-and-act tank needed a home and money, and a new partner emerged when Harry Jacobson, Vanderbilt's vice chancellor for external affairs and local health care entrepreneur, was tapped to chair the Health Care Council. He proposed that Vanderbilt partner with the Health Care Council, providing office space and part of the funding for the Solutions Group.

The partnership with Vanderbilt is key because the college will provide significant academic, research and educational resources, says Matt Gallivan, head of the Health Care Council. One of those resources is the Vanderbilt Center for Better Health, which looks at using information technology to improve health care delivery.

What direction the Solutions Group takes will likely be set in late February, when 100 industry officials convene in Nashville for a summit meeting. Osborn, who's leaving the executive director post at the Center for Better Health, envisions the Solutions Group tackling one or two issues at a time.

These issues will be the major ones affecting the industry, such as pay for performance, and could take up to a couple of years to complete and include businesses from different, but related sectors.

"This isn't something to tackle issues in [Vanderbilt University](#). It isn't something to tackle in Nashville. It's something to look at nationally," Osborn says.

That ambition is being joined with efforts at the federal level. In launching the Solutions Group in Washington, D.C., officials invited Sen. Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader, Sen. Lamar Alexander and Rep. Jim Cooper, Nashville's Congressman. Gallivan says some Congressional representatives have expressed a desire for reliable source of information.

Osborn says his group's information is attractive because it'll come from a nonpolitical and non-lobbying organization that receives its funding from Vanderbilt, the Health Care Council and private gifts.

Headquartered in Nashville, the Solutions Group faces the challenge of standing out in a sea of think tanks and trade groups littering Washington with proposals to reform the health care sector. Many of these groups are producing white papers inside academic settings instead of action plans, Osborn says.

"Obviously, there are significant cost, quality and access issues facing the health care system and the solutions to a certain extent coming from existing policy groups and think tanks have not really solved some of the cost and access issues," Gallivan adds.

To rise above this cacophony of competing voices, the Solutions Group will rely on the one thing that distinguishes Nashville from the rest of the country - a vibrant health care business community.

These companies will be the laboratories for many of the ideas. For instance, testing a P4P model that rewards physicians for improved outcomes would work best if tested across multiple hospitals in a single market. Such an idea would likely involve HCA, which creates clusters of hospitals in urban markets across the country.

All of these companies have a stake in the current system, but Osborn stresses executives are leaving their own agendas at the door.

"Tom Cigarran at [American Healthways](#) and Jack Bovender at HCA, they all understand we're not doing into this to make more money for Nashville health care companies," Osborn says. "They understand the role of this group is very focused on the health system. They're all frustrated that not much has happened. We're seeing in Washington, there's not much (work being done)."

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