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Advocates begin fundraising for new birth center

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Our Community Birth Center has kicked off a capital fundraising campaign.

After many a protest, testimony and petition, the birth center facility at PeaceHealth closed Aug. 31. But advocates who first united for the sake of the birth facility stayed together to offer plans for new birth center.

Our Community Birth Center, the newly developing freestanding birth center in Lane County, formally launched its capital fundraising campaign Wednesday. The birth center plans to provide services left by the closure of the Nurse Midwifery Birth Center in Springfield.

“Right now there is a big gap in choices in Lane County with the closure of the PeaceHealth birth center,” Chris Heritage, midwife and Our Community Birth Center board member, said. “We need to restore that choice for women and their families and their babies. It’s critically important.”

The group intends to raise \$775,000 to finance starting up the new center as well as one year of operation. The group has not yet picked a location, but would prefer to be in Springfield, close to area hospitals. They hope to hire two midwives, three nurses and one support staff member, but grow larger with time.

The money will go toward leasing and remodeling a building, buying supplies, equipment, furniture, paying staff and the expenses of caring for clients. After their first year, they will need \$100,000 a year help fill the gap for patients who may struggle paying for services. The center plans to work closely with insurers including the Oregon Health Plan.

Much like pregnancy, the exact timeline of the project is uncertain, said the AlexAnn Westlake, an area midwife and the new center's executive director.

"You never really know what date that baby is going to come," Westlake said.

If all moves quickly and according to plan, the center could be opened by fall of 2020. The clinic will aim to provide a wide range of services including pregnancy, birth, postpartum, newborn, lactation, health education, preventative health care, women's health, and family planning. The group is seeking community input through [a survey at OurCommunityBirthcenter.org](https://www.OurCommunityBirthcenter.org).

While board members of Our Community Birth Center fielded questions from a small group of community members Wednesday at the Wine Lab, babies in attendance often chimed in. Some of the mothers who had babies in tow don't plan on having any more children and won't be needing the services provided by a birthing clinic, but attended the conference to show support.

Kelsey Lawless held her babbling baby and reflected on delivering her firstborn at the birth center.

"The birth of my child changed my life," Lawless said.

Lawless said the care she received at the birth center motivated her to become a doula, a person who guides or supports pregnant women through delivery and sometimes after.

In a news release, the group said Lane County has been home to a nurse midwifery birth center since the late 1970s, and the Eugene and Springfield communities have demonstrated a strong demand for birth center care, most recently with the campaign to prevent the closure of the birth center, advocacy led by the Lane County Friends of the Birth Center.

The Friends of the Birth Center now will serve as the Consumer Advisory Board for the new birth center, to share consumer advice with the center's directors and staff and help educate the community about the purpose of the birth center. Members all received birth center care in Lane County. The Friends support community access to an accredited, freestanding birth center.

The new center's board of directors include Chris Heritage, a certified nurse midwife; Mary Carpenter, board president and certified nurse midwife; Dr. Justine Parker, board vice president and practices family medicine and obstetrics at PeaceHealth Peace Harbor Medical Center; Ricky Grand, co-owner of Grand Realty Investments; Teresa Roark, program supervisor at Lane County Health and Human Services; Ruth Ezeonwuka, supervisor and child and family therapist at The Child Center; Dennis Carr, retired from chief human resources officer for Lane Community College; Kara Schnoes, market and consumer strategist at Oregon Community Credit Union, and Rachel Basolo, professional doula.

"Currently there is a maternal health crisis in the U.S.," Westlake said at the event. "C-section rates are much higher than they should be. And birth centers are an evidence-based way to address that problem in our community and throughout the U.S."

According to PeaceHealth, 31 mothers were planning to give birth at the center before the closure. While activists argued the loss of a birth center would be detrimental to the community, PeaceHealth spokespeople maintained that their center was not closing, but changing.

"With deliveries transitioning to RiverBend, the Birth Center will be renamed and repurposed, but will continue to be a vital component of our women's care and family services offerings," said PeaceHealth spokesperson Marcy Marshall in an email to the Register-Guard.

Advocates have publicly played with the idea of creating a new birth center as early as July. On Dec. 11, the group will have an additional fundraising event at Capitello Wines. Leadership said it will be a family-friendly event.