

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

December 17, 2025

Tom Gessel
President & CEO
Asante Health System
2650 Siskiyou Blvd, Ste 100
Medford, OR 97504

Dear Mr. Gessel:

I write today to express concerns regarding Asante's plan to close the birthing center and stop inpatient care at Ashland Community Hospital by May 2026. I anticipate that this decision will hurt the health and safety of individuals seeking inpatient care, as well as expectant mothers and newborns, who will no longer have local access to care.

Ashland Community Hospital has served Southwest Oregon for almost 120 years, and the closure of its birthing center and inpatient hospital could force patients to travel long distances to receive routine and emergency obstetric care as well as treatment for severe conditions and major surgeries. In addition, this closure would likely create an undue burden for many families, especially those with limited funds, limited transportation, or complex medical needs, and it may cause them to bypass necessary care.

I am aware of the economic challenges that are squeezing the finances of labor and delivery units across Oregon. Low birth volumes and challenging reimbursement rates driven by inflation, workforce shortages, and rising supply costs make it difficult for hospitals to continue offering birthing services. In addition, I recognize the financial difficulties surrounding inpatient care, including a decrease in Medicare inpatient payment rates and delays in discharging patients to post-acute facilities, which are driven by prior authorization requirements and can contribute to longer and more expensive inpatient stays.

I expect these challenges will only get worse given the Republican reconciliation bill that gutted the health care system by \$1 trillion, thereby making it harder for rural and community hospitals to survive. As a result of these cuts, rural and community hospitals will be forced into impossible choices and unpopular operational decisions, like cutting labor and delivery services and inpatient care, in order to keep their doors open.


However, I have also seen the negative impacts of hospitals closing their birthing centers and shuttering inpatient care on Oregon patients, particularly in rural communities. Minutes matter for parents and newborns, and health care providers across Oregon have reported seeing more patients than ever before who are sicker and more complex. These cuts will harm caregivers and the health and safety of communities in Southwestern Oregon, leaving patients and families with fewer choices, longer waits, and worse healthcare.

As Asante closes down the birthing center and stops providing inpatient care at Ashland Community Hospital, I urge you to assist expectant families who need to find alternative options for safe maternal health care and patients who are seeking inpatient care. In addition, I urge you to continue to provide meaningful support to the physicians, nurses, and other clinicians whose

jobs will be affected by the halt in obstetrics care and inpatient surgery at Ashland Community Hospital. Finally, I urge Asante to engage in a transparent process with the community it serves as it winds down local obstetrics care and inpatient surgery.

Thank you for your attention to this letter and for your commitment to serving the health care needs of Oregon families.

Sincerely,


Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator