



A shop of their own
After years of selling
at local farmers markets,
Hexagon Bagels settles
into a North Adams
storefront. **Page 7**

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Business Journal
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Berkshire Business Journal

DECEMBER 2025 | VOL. 4, NO. 12

Long-term care in the pipeline





STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN

William Jones is president and CEO of Pittsfield-based Integritus Healthcare, which employs 2,850 people at long-term care and senior housing facilities across the state — including eight in Berkshire County. Integritus, he said, has “a terrific group of people who do a remarkable job making a difference in the lives of the people they serve.”

Integritus Healthcare invests to meet a growing need

By GREG SUKIENNIK

PITTSFIELD — Artificial intelligence isn't coming for jobs in long-term care. That's a person-to-person, labor-intensive field with challenges and rewards a computer can't handle.

But more than five years after the COVID-19 pandemic, Pittsfield-based Integritus Healthcare, like other long-term care and health care providers, still faces workforce challenges created or worsened during that time.

The workforce pipeline for health care workers has grown scarce, just as the need for long-term care is about to skyrocket.

Integritus decided to build its own pipeline.

Since identifying and beginning that work in 2009, with the launch of its first

strategic plan, Integritus has brought about 200 people into nursing careers through support of higher education, training and career development.

An investment of nearly \$3 million has aided in the career development of 70 registered nurses and 84 licensed practical nurses and led to 19 nurses earning bachelor's degrees in nursing science.

“As nurses and aides retired or left the industry altogether, we've come to the other side of [the pandemic] with this challenge,” said William Jones, the

nonprofit's president and CEO. Integritus offers care including independent senior living, rehabilitation, memory care and hospice.

Like other long-term care providers, Integritus has relied upon “traveling nurse” staffing services to backfill openings. Those services pay a “significant premium” to those workers, and the cost is passed along to the long-term care facility, Jones said.

“We're not alone,” he said. “Every organization has had to deal with this challenge.”

Developing and retaining workforce not only provides jobs for the region but also helps its largest long-term care and rehabilitation provider operate at lower cost, he said.

“We have a strategic partnership with McCann Tech,” Jones said. “If you're a CNA and want to become an LPN we've always paid your tuition and picked up the cost of books and uniforms. Last year we began to pay individuals to go to class as if they were working.”

A paycheck for going to school? Yes, Jones said, and explained why that makes sense.

“Many times we're dealing with single moms who can't juggle child care and get to class during the day,” Jones said. “So we're doing things like that ... to motivate.”

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Integritus operates 15 skilled nursing centers with 1,950 beds and four senior housing communities with 227 independent living units. 1,789 assisted living units.

Healthcare

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vate and inspire individuals who want to advance their career by making opportunities like that available to them."

Integritus also has a long-established relationship with Berkshire Community College, which is seeing its nursing program grow in part thanks to the state making community college tuition free.

"We're having some good results this year," Jones said of Integritus' investment in training and education.

"Looking at net hires, the difference between new hires and people who leave is significantly improved from where it was a year ago," he said. "It's going to take some time, unfortunately, but we're making the necessary investment to be here for the long run."

Integritus employs 2,850 people, with 1,263 of those workers, or 44 percent, employed in its Pittsfield headquarters and eight Berkshire County entities, including HospiceCare in the Berkshires. It also operates facilities in Greenfield, Leeds, Holyoke, East Longmeadow, Danvers, Peabody, New Bedford, Bourne and South Yarmouth.

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Jones said Integritus has "a terrific group of people who do a remarkable job making a difference in the lives of the people they serve."

The need for long-term care will only grow as the region's



Nursing students at Berkshire Community College use a simulator to stabilize a computer controlled patient in December 2022. Integritus Healthcare has brought about 200 people into nursing careers through support of higher education, training and career development, including at BCC and McCann Tech in North Adams.

BEN GARVER

population ages. As of the 2020 U.S. Census, 36 percent of the county population was at least 60 years old. The largest age range in the county, at 18 percent, is people between the ages of 60 and 69, according to that data.

In August, Gov. Maura Healey's Viability and Sustainability of Long-term Care Facilities Task Force, citing projections by the UMass Donahue Institute, reported the state could be facing a deficit of skilled nursing beds by 2035.

That crunch could come as soon as 2029, a former state official analyzing the same data told State House News Service.

To that end, Integritus is making an investment that it hopes will result in additional housing as well as long-term revenue. It's partnering with the owners of the Berkshire Mall in Lanesborough on a proposed 420-unit senior housing community. The project, estimated at more than \$100 million, also would include re-

tail shops.

"I thought we should reach out, because this is what we do. It's our mission," Jones said in August of Integritus' involvement. "If there truly is a need for additional senior housing in the Berkshires, we want to be involved in that."

Insurance reimbursements, especially those from Medicaid, don't match the cost of providing care and are often not paid in a timely fashion. Massachusetts increased its Medicaid payments

as of Oct. 1, Jones said, and he's thankful for the local statehouse delegation's advocacy. That said, he remains concerned about the federal and state picture.

"We do a lot of work to educate decision-makers on the impact of the decisions they make and try to help them see the reality of what we're dealing with," Jones said.

"We went into pandemic organizationally with an outstanding balance sheet," he said. "I always thought ... there would come a day we'd have to lean on that balance sheet. I never thought it would be a pandemic."

Post-pandemic, the company's financial position is "very strong," Jones said.

"Our volume levels are at or better than pre-pandemic levels and our teams across the commonwealth have done a remarkable job navigating pandemic in a way that ensures our long-term viability and sustainability," he said. "We have tremendous confidence in where we're at and where we're going."

According to data provided by Integritus, it recorded revenues of \$301 million in 2024, an increase of 11.3 percent.

The organization intends to stick around for the long haul, Jones said when asked if it would ever consider a sale to a larger provider.

"We're not for sale. Our roots are over 100 years deep here in the Berkshires," Jones said. "We have a strong balance sheet. We're the largest not-for-profit post-acute operator in the state and we take that responsibility seriously. We're focused on providing high-quality post-acute services, and we're committed to doing that in the long run."