



**WRITTEN COMMENTS ON PROJECT ID B-012380-23
MISSION HOSPITAL FREESTANDING EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT
SUBMITTED BY ADVENTHEALTH HENDERSONVILLE & ADVENTHEALTH ASHEVILLE**

MAY 31, 2023

Fletcher Hospital, Incorporated d/b/a AdventHealth Hendersonville and AdventHealth Asheville, Inc. (hereinafter collectively referred to as “AdventHealth”) submit these comments in accordance with N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-185(a1)(1) to address the representations in the application submitted by MH Mission Hospital, LLLP (Mission) to develop a freestanding emergency department (FSER) in west Asheville, including a discussion of the most significant issues regarding the applicant’s conformity with the statutory and regulatory review criteria (“the Criteria”) in N.C. Gen. Stat. §131E-183(a). Other non-conformities in the application may exist and AdventHealth reserves the right to develop additional opinions, as appropriate upon further review and analysis.

Background

Project ID B-012380-23 represents Mission’s third attempt to develop a FSER in Buncombe County. In June 2021, Mission filed a CON application to develop a FSER in Arden (Project ID B-012093-21). AdventHealth Hendersonville submitted written comments in opposition to the Arden FSER application. The project was denied by the Agency and the decision was appealed by Mission, with AdventHealth Hendersonville intervening in the case. Mission ultimately withdrew from the contested case proceeding, effectively abandoning the 2021 Arden FSER application.

In February 2022, Mission filed two CON applications: one was a re-filing to develop the FSER in Arden (Project ID B-012191-22) and the other was to develop a FSER in Candler (FSER West, Project ID B-012192-22). AdventHealth Hendersonville submitted written comments in opposition to the 2022 Arden and Candler FSER applications. The projects were conditionally approved by the Agency and the decisions were each appealed by AdventHealth Hendersonville.

In a Final Decision Granting Summary Judgement filed on March 17, 2023, Administrative Law Judge David Sutton overturned the Agency’s decision to approve the FSER West project - a project that Mission seeks to develop and expand on in the application at issue in this review. Mission is appealing Judge Sutton’s ruling. The ruling on the Arden FSER is due by June 23, 2023.

Mission states that Project ID B-012380-23 represents its effort to refile the 2022 FSER West application and the need for the project is the same as that proposed in 2022.¹ However, it is essential to acknowledge that significant changes have taken place in Buncombe County since Mission initially filed the 2022 FSER West application. These changes directly impact Mission’s stated need for the FSER West project.

¹ Application page 34

First, in November 2022, AdventHealth Asheville received CON approval to develop a new acute care hospital in Buncombe County with 67 acute care beds and 12 emergency department exam rooms, i.e., AdventHealth Asheville, CON Project ID B-12233-22.

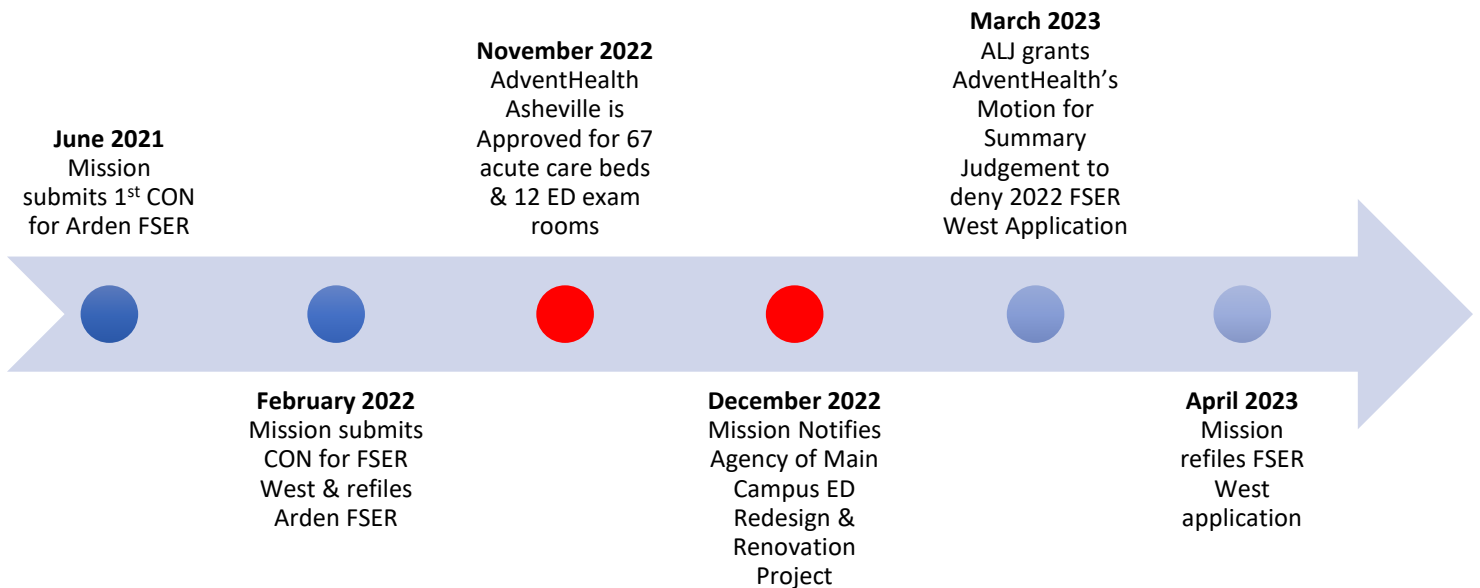
Second, on December 9, 2022 Mission notified the Agency of its intent to redesign and renovate the emergency department at Mission Main. The Mission main campus ED project involves:

- Acquisition of a new CT Scanner to augment to Mission’s existing 2 ER-based CT Scanners to optimize patient flow;
- Renovate existing space to:
 - Relocate the existing MS lounge;
 - Create a renovated pediatric ER pod;
 - Create a renovated 24-hour BH pod with intake rooms, a security work area and related support space; and
- Renovate and upgrade other portions of the existing ER to maximize space and efficiency

See Attachment A for a copy of Mission’s notice of exemption for the redesign and renovation of MH Mission Hospital, LLLP’s emergency department.

A summary of the key events relevant to this review is provided below.

Figure 1: Timeline of Events Relevant to 2023 Mission FSER West Application



As discussed further in these written comments, it is crucial to recognize and address the relevant changes within the Buncombe County healthcare landscape because they have implications for Mission’s 2023 FSER West project feasibility, relevance, and impact on existing and approved health service facilities. Mission FSER West will unnecessarily duplicate existing and approved emergency department services in Buncombe and Henderson counties and will inflict great harm onto AdventHealth by redirecting emergency department visits and subsequent inpatient admissions to Mission.

General Comments

In February 2022, Mission filed an application for Mission FSER West to be located at Intersection of Smokey Park Highway and Brookside Circle in Candler, NC. As previously described, in March 2023 Administrative Law Judge David Sutton granted AdventHealth's motion for summary judgement to deny the 2022 Mission FSER West application. The 2023 Mission FSER West application proposes to develop a FSER at a site within approximately one mile of the 2022 Mission FSER West proposed site.

Among the many Buncombe County primary care physician locations that have closed since HCA purchased Mission Health, Mission closed its primary care office in Candler effective October 20, 2020 leaving patients without local access to essential primary care services.² Recognizing the need to replenish access to primary care services, AdventHealth invested in the Candler community by establishing AdventHealth Medical Group Multispecialty at Candler in the same medical office building Mission vacated in 2020. After abandoning essential primary care services, Mission now proposes to fill the void it left in Candler/west Asheville with high-cost emergency medical services.

The Department of Health and Human Services is charged with ensuring that unnecessary duplication of regulated healthcare facilities does not occur. This does not mean that the duplication of every regulated healthcare facility should be prohibited. Rather, the Agency is responsible for ensuring that such duplication does not occur in situations where it is unnecessary. The 2023 FSER West project proposed by Mission is beyond unnecessary; it is harmful to the public welfare. As discussed below, numerous physicians have left Mission (See Attachment B) and public reporting on quality issues demonstrates that government officials are concerned that there is desperately needed competition in the area. (See Attachment C). Approval of the Mission 2023 FSER West project would mean that the State of North Carolina has ignored facts that clearly show the public is being harmed by Mission's lack of competitors. The project proposed by Mission is an attempt to further squeeze out and harm competitors.

Mission is currently the subject of a lawsuit under the North Carolina Constitution and the North Carolina Antitrust Statutes, in which it is argued that Mission has acted in restraint of trade and that it has unlawfully monopolized the provision of inpatient general acute care services in the region. (See Attachment D). While Mission has every right to be heard and to have its "day in Court," the cacophony of voices seeking the help for employees, patients, physicians, and facilities in the region simply cannot be ignored.

Mission projects to capture a significant portion of its primary service area market share to support the FSED. Such conjectures are detrimental to the viability of existing Henderson County acute care facilities, including AdventHealth Hendersonville, and the approved new AdventHealth Asheville acute care facility in Buncombe County. Approximately 89 percent of AdventHealth Hendersonville's inpatient admissions originate from its emergency department.³ Therefore, Mission's proposed disruption of established emergency department patient utilization patterns will have a catastrophic impact on acute care utilization at AdventHealth Hendersonville and AdventHealth Asheville.

² <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2020/09/16/mission-health-stop-primary-care-services-biltmore-park-candler/5818247002/>

³ Source: AdventHealth Hendersonville 2023 License Renewal Application, FY2022: 2,831 admits from the ED ÷ 3,168 acute care admissions

The project that is the subject of these comments is explicitly designed to further entrench a monopolist’s market share and bring more patients to Mission’s acute care facility in Asheville. That is, they are targeting existing and approved providers (including AdventHealth Hendersonville and AdventHealth Asheville) to duplicate their services, starve them of resources, and increase the scope and range of Mission’s market control. This is the very epitome of unnecessary duplication and results in the following non-conformities with respect to the applicable statutory review criteria.

Criterion 3 *“The applicant shall identify the population to be served by the proposed project and shall demonstrate the need that this population has for the services proposed, and the extent to which all residents of the area, and, in particular, low-income persons, racial and ethnic minorities, women, handicapped persons, the elderly, and other underserved groups are likely to have access to the services proposed.”*

Service Area

Mission proposes to develop a FSER at 36 Crowell Road in west Asheville. The service area for FSER West consists of the following zip codes.

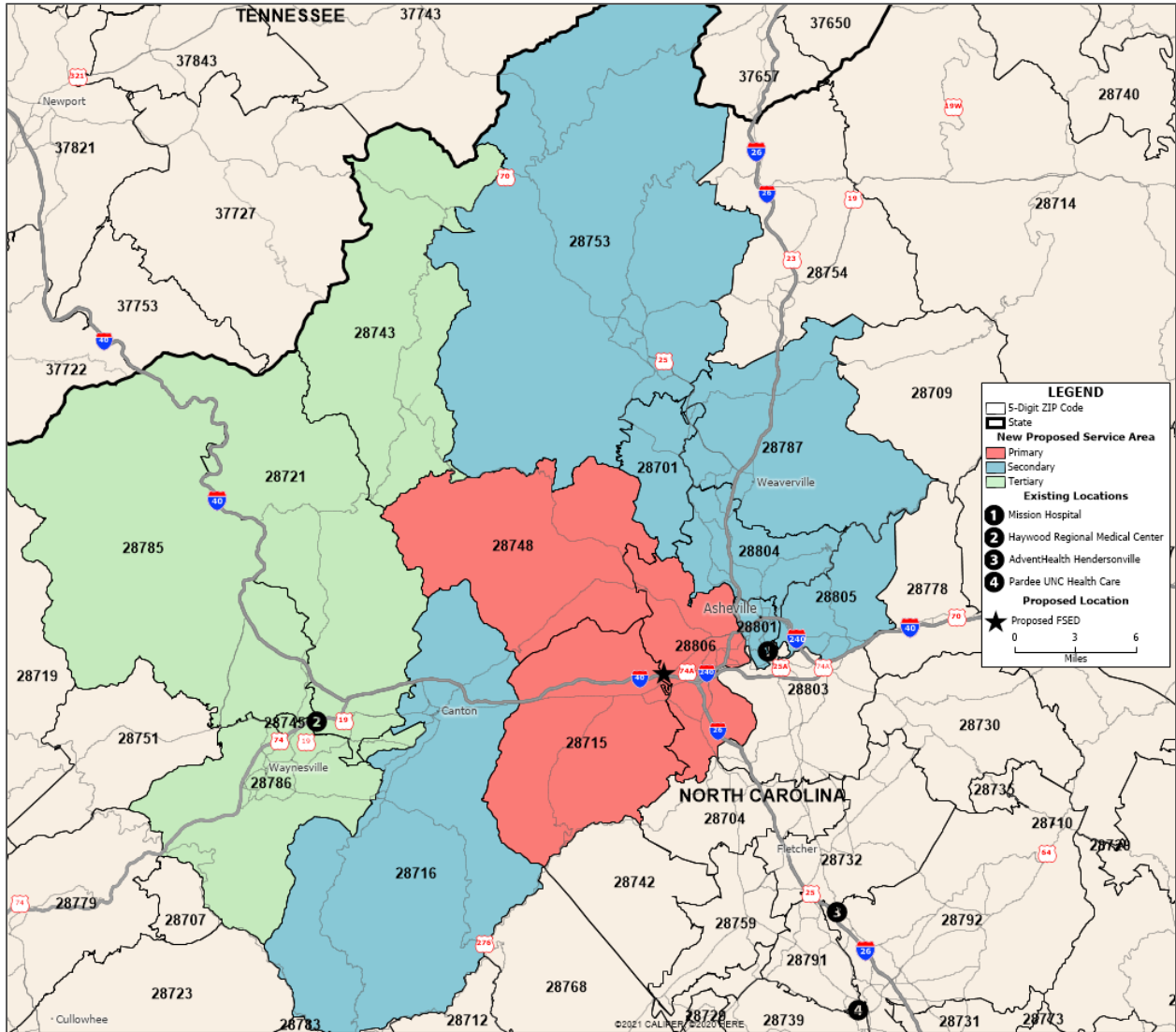
**Table 1: Mission FSER West
Zip Code Service Area⁴**

Service Area	Zip Code	Zip Code County
Primary Service Area	28806	Buncombe
Primary Service Area	28715	Buncombe
Primary Service Area	28748	Buncombe
Secondary Service Area	28801	Buncombe
Secondary Service Area	28787	Buncombe
Secondary Service Area	28805	Buncombe
Secondary Service Area	28804	Buncombe
Secondary Service Area	28753	Madison
Secondary Service Area	28716	Haywood
Secondary Service Area	28701	Buncombe
Tertiary Service Area	28786	Haywood
Tertiary Service Area	28721	Haywood
Tertiary Service Area	28743	Madison
Tertiary Service Area	28785	Haywood
Tertiary Service Area	28745	Haywood

⁴ Application page 49, Figure 5

Application page 49 states, “there are no other hospitals in Buncombe County.” However, Mission failed to acknowledge the Agency’s decision to approve AdventHealth Asheville’s CON application to develop a new acute care hospital with 67 acute care beds and 12 ED exam rooms in Buncombe County, Project ID B-12233-22. Similarly, Mission’s FSER West service area map on application page 50 conveniently omits the service area for AdventHealth Asheville’s approved hospital, which overlaps significantly with Mission FSER West’s primary service area.

**Figure 2: Mission FSER West
Zip Code Service Area Map**



Source: Project ID B-012380-23, application page 50

AdventHealth Asheville’s service area consists of the zip codes located in Buncombe, Graham, Madison, and Yancey counties, which includes the same zip codes identified in the Mission FSER West service area.⁵ Therefore, AdventHealth Asheville’s approved emergency department will serve the same patients

⁵AdventHealth Asheville Project ID B-12233-22, Sections C and Q

included in the Mission FSER West service area. Additionally, the proposed service area does not reflect several zip codes that are adjacent to or near the zip code where the Mission FSER West is proposed to be built. Specifically, zip codes 28742 and 28704 are adjacent to the 28715 zip code where the Mission FSER West is proposed, and the 28803 zip code is closer by drive time and distance than many of the other zip codes in the proposed service area. Zip codes 28742 and 28704 are presently served by AdventHealth Hendersonville and are also included in the AdventHealth Asheville service area.

Specific to Mission’s stated need for increased access to emergency services, AdventHealth Asheville will greatly increase the availability of emergency services for residents of the Mission FSER West service area by developing a full-service emergency department with 12 exam rooms. In its approved application, AdventHealth Asheville projects to serve 12,706 emergency department visits during its third project year. More than 77% of AdventHealth Asheville’s projected emergency department visits ($12,706 \times .772 = 9,809$) will be patients from Buncombe County.⁶ Furthermore, the AdventHealth Asheville service area overlaps nine of the 15 zip codes identified in the Mission FSER West service area. The following table summarizes the overlapping service area zip codes between the proposed Mission FSER West project and the approved AdventHealth Asheville project.

**Overlapping Service Area Zip Codes
AdventHealth Asheville & Mission FSER West**

Zip Code - County
28806 – Buncombe
28715 – Buncombe
28748 – Buncombe
28801 – Buncombe
28787 – Buncombe
28805 – Buncombe
28804 – Buncombe
28701 – Buncombe
28753 - Madison

Source: B-012380-23 & B-12233-22

Additionally, AdventHealth Hendersonville is an existing acute care hospital in adjacent Henderson County that also serves patients from the zip codes in the Mission FSER West service area. During FY2021, AdventHealth Hendersonville served approximately 3,000 ED visits from the Mission FSER West service area. As previously described, AdventHealth Hendersonville’s emergency department is the primary source of inpatient admissions for the facility. Thus, the Mission FSER West project directly threatens future inpatient admissions at AdventHealth Hendersonville.

AdventHealth would note that the project timetable for AdventHealth Asheville would allow it to begin development the new hospital immediately after receiving its certificate of need, which would bring a new hospital to Buncombe County by January 2025; however, Mission is preventing development of AdventHealth Asheville by appealing the Agency’s decision. While delaying progress on AdventHealth Asheville’s approved new emergency department, Mission is simultaneously proposing to establish

⁶ Project ID B-12233-22, Section C.3b

incremental emergency department capacity with the same number of exams rooms as approved for AdventHealth Asheville, i.e., 12 exam/treatment rooms and projecting to serve the same ED patients identified in the AdventHealth Asheville application.

Mission’s proposal to develop a FSER in west Asheville unnecessarily duplicates AdventHealth’s existing and previously approved emergency services, as shown in the following analysis.

Mission’s CON application to develop a FSER in Arden (Project ID B-012191-22) includes an overlapping zip code with the FSER West service area, i.e., 28806. Mission projects zip code 28806 will account for the third highest number of patients served at FSER Arden, reflecting approximately 14 percent patient origin in Project Year 3.⁷ The following table summarizes the projected ED utilization for zip code 28806 as proposed by Mission FSER Arden.

**Table 2: Mission FSER Arden B-12191-22
FSER Visit Projections for Zip Code 28806**

	Project Year 1	Project Year 2	Project Year 3
	2025	2026	2027
FSER Visits	1,557	1,563	1,569

Source: FSER Arden B-12191-22, pp. 68-69 Figures 25-27

Notably, zip code 28806 accounts for the highest percentage of service area volume for FSER West, reflecting 14.7% of total projected ED visits during the third project year.⁸

AdventHealth notes the Mission 2023 FSER West application does not include market share projections or projected FSER visits for the previously approved Mission FSER Arden project, B-12191-22. Specifically, Mission’s 2022 market share calculations in the 2023 FSER West application are based on a comparison of Mission’s 2022 ED visits compared to the total number of ED visits performed in the service area. Mission projects incremental ED visit market share based solely on development of the 2023 FSER West proposal. Application page 85 states, “Mission projected the incremental market share it expects to capture due to the presence of the proposed FSER and the increased access it will provide.” Furthermore, Form C.4a includes projections only for the 94 treatment rooms at Mission Hospital and the proposed 12 treatment rooms at FSER West. Thus, it is clear that Mission failed to provide any ED visits or market share for FSER Arden in the 2023 FSER West application. Therefore, projected ER visits in the 2023 FSER West application include only the Mission Main ED and FSER West.⁹

The following table summarizes Mission’s emergency department visits for the 2022 FSER Arden project in addition to the projections included in the 2023 FSER West application.

⁷ B-12191-22, page, page 41, Section C.3 Projected Patient Origin

⁸ B-12380-23, page 45, Section C.3 Projected Patient Origin

⁹ Form C.4a includes projections for the 94 treatment rooms at Mission Hospital and 12 treatment rooms at FSER West. Therefore, no utilization or market share for FSER Arden is included in the FSER West application.

Table 3: Mission ED Visit Projections for Zip Code 28806

Column	Mission FSER Applications	2026	2027	2028
A	2022 FSER Arden B-12191-22	1,563	1,569	1,569*
B	Total Mission ED Visits 2023 FSER West B-12380-23	11,790	11,779	11,768
C	<i>FSER West</i>	<i>1,332</i>	<i>1,331</i>	<i>1,337</i>
D	<i>Mission Main ED</i>	<i>10,458</i>	<i>10,448</i>	<i>10,431</i>
A + C + D = E A + B = E	Total Mission ED Visit Projections for Zip Code 28806	13,353	13,348	13,337

*Assumes ED visits remain constant with project year 3 ED visits

Source: FSER Arden B-12191-22, pp.68-69 Figures 25-27; FSER West B-12380-23, pp. 88-90 Figures 37-39

As previously described, AdventHealth Asheville included zip code 28806 in its service area for acute care services. The table below summarizes the number of ED visits from zip code 28806 that will be served at AdventHealth Asheville based on the methodology described in the approved application.

**Table 4: AdventHealth Asheville
Zip Code 28806 ED Visits**

Zip Code	A	B	A x B = C	D	D x C = E	F	E ÷ F = G
	Table Q.6	Table Q.17	Total Discharges	Table Q.32	Patients Admitted from ED	Table Q.33	ED Visits
	MedSurg Discharges	OB Discharges		% Admitted from ED		ED Admits as a % of ED Visits	
28806	512	99	611	41%	251	16%	1,566

Source: AdventHealth Asheville B-12233-22, Section Q

The following table combines the projected ED visits served for zip code 28806 based on Mission's approved 2022 FSER Arden application, Mission's proposed 2023 FSER West application, and AdventHealth Asheville's approved application.

Table 5: ED Visit Projections for Zip Code 28806

Reference	Provider/Project	2028
Table 3, Column A	2022 Mission FSER Arden B-12191-22	1,569
Table 3, Column B	2023 Mission FSER West B-12380-23	11,768
Table 4	AdventHealth Asheville B-12233-22	1,566
Total Projected ED Visits by Mission & AdventHealth Asheville		14,903

Mission failed to account for the previously approved ED visit projections that will be served at Mission FSER Arden and AdventHealth Asheville. Mission’s oversight reflects a significant error in its 2023 FSER West application. Specifically, in Figure 39 (2023 FSER West application page 90) Mission projects 13,338 total market ED visits in zip code 28806 during 2028.¹⁰ However, Mission’s total market projections for zip code 28806 are less than the total number of projected ED visits that will be served by Mission and AdventHealth Asheville. See the following table.

Table 6: Comparison of Total ED Market Visits to Total Projected ED Visits Served by Mission & AdventHealth Asheville, Zip Code 28806

Reference		2028
Table 5	Total Projected ED Visits by Mission & AdventHealth Asheville	14,903
2023 FSER West page 90, Fig. 39	Total ED Market Visits Based on 2023 Mission FSER West Methodology	13,338
Difference		-1,565

As shown in the previous table, the 2023 Mission FSER West project will unnecessarily duplicate existing and approved emergency services because the total projected number of ED visits to be served by existing and approved facilities exceeds Mission’s ED visit market projections for zip code 28806.

Even in a hypothetical scenario where AdventHealth Asheville’s projected ED visits are excluded from the analysis, Mission’s approved and proposed projects will gain effectively 100% of the market share for zip code 28806.¹¹

¹⁰ Total market visits mean the total number of ED visits originating from zip code 28806 served by all providers.

¹¹ AdventHealth does not concede that the ED visits included in the AdventHealth Asheville application should be excluded from the analysis. The hypothetical scenario is provided for illustrative purposes.

Table 7: Mission Projected ED Visit Market Share: Zip Code 28806

Column	Project	2028
A	2022 Mission FSER Arden B-12191-22	1,569
B	2023 Mission FSER West B-12380-23	11,768
A + B = C	Total Mission ED Visits for Zip Code 28806	13,337
D	Total ED Market Visits Based on 2023 Mission FSER West Methodology	13,338
C ÷ D = E	Mission ED Visit Market Share for Zip Code 28806	100%

AdventHealth notes, the previous analysis excludes the historical ED patients from zip code 28806 that have historically been served by other existing facilities. Specifically, AdventHealth Hendersonville served 972 emergency department patients from zip code 28806 during FY2021. Mission’s methodology assumes AdventHealth Hendersonville will lose 100% of its historical market share as a result of the Mission FSER West project. Like many rural hospitals, AdventHealth Hendersonville’s emergency department is the lifeblood of the facility, accounting for 89% of inpatient admissions. Therefore, what Mission may consider small market share gains will actually have a detrimental impact on AdventHealth Hendersonville.

Mission’s market share assumptions associated with the 2023 FSER West and 2022 FSER Arden projects would collectively result in approximately 100 percent market share in zip code 28806 during Project Year 3. Mission’s extraordinarily high market share projections are undoubtedly intended to thwart competition and threaten the viability of AdventHealth Hendersonville, as well as AdventHealth Asheville’s approved project. Such objectives will result in great harm to AdventHealth and are in conflict with the basic principles of the state health planning process and intention of the certificate of need statute.

Mission Main Emergency Department Renovation and Redesign Project

The 2023 Mission FSER West application states the need for the proposed project is based, in part, on the capacity constraints at its main campus ED due to operational configuration. Application page 61 states, “the pre-HCA design of the ED did not incorporate the experience of affiliate HCA Healthcare, which is known nationally for the efficiency of design and operations of its EDs.”

On December 9, 2022 Mission notified the Agency of its intent to redesign and renovate the Mission main campus ED. According to Mission’s notice of exemption letter to the Healthcare Planning and Certificate of Need Section, the project involves:

- Acquisition of a new CT Scanner to augment to Mission’s existing 2 ER-based CT Scanners to optimize patient flow;
- Renovate existing space to:
 - Relocate the existing EMS lounge;

- Create a renovated pediatric ER pod;
- Create a renovated 24-hour behavioral health pod with intake rooms, a security work area, and related support space; and
- Renovate and upgrade other portions of the existing ER to maximize space and efficiency

See Attachment A for a copy of Mission’s notice of exemption for the redesign and renovation of Mission’s main campus ED. For information purposes, on January 2, 2023 the Agency responded to the exemption notice acknowledging receipt of Mission’s correspondence and confirming the renovation and redesign project is exempt from CON review.

The capital cost form included in Attachment A for the “Mission Hospital ER Redesign” project is \$12,724,000. Of that amount, \$8,764,000 will be spent on construction and renovation related to renovating the Mission main campus ED. Mission’s total capital investment in the Main Campus ED Renovation and Redesign project (\$12.7M), which is comparable to the capital cost for the 2022 Mission FSER Arden project (\$13.3M) and nearly half the proposed capital expenditure for the 2023 Mission FSER West project (\$29.3M).

Mission’s notice of exemption letter states, “The purpose of the Project is to redesign certain components of the main ER to optimize patient flow, patient experience and overall operations of the ER. The Project will also address the special needs of Behavioral Health (“BH”) ER patients.”

As previously described, the notice of exemption for the Mission Main Campus ED Renovation and Redesign project was submitted less than five months prior to the submission of the 2023 Mission FSER West application. FSER West application page 62 begins a discussion of “Configuration of Mission’s Existing ED for Specialized Care” and identifies the types of specialty treatment bays within the Mission main campus ED, i.e., trauma, pediatric, behavioral health, and general. Mission states, “Designated specialized care areas maximize the benefits for the patient but create challenges for Mission in patient throughput.” AdventHealth notes the December 9, 2022 notice of exemption letter from Mission to the Agency specifically references changes to the pediatric and behavioral health treatment bays for the express purpose of optimizing patient flow, patient experience and overall operations of the ER. However, the 2023 Mission FSER West application fails to acknowledge the Mission Main Campus ED Renovation and Redesign project entirely and, more importantly, fails to consider the improvements that the Main Campus ED Renovation and Redesign project will have on space accommodations, patient flow, and overall operational efficiency.

Mission has the sole burden of demonstrating the need it has for the incremental emergency services proposed in the 2023 FSER West application, and Mission failed to satisfy its burden by purposely omitting relevant facts from its need analysis that will have a direct impact on operational efficiency and capacity in the Mission main campus ED.

Claims of Acute Care Bed Capacity Constraints

Mission claims that its ability to serve emergency patients is impacted by both capacity constraints in the ED and bed capacity constraints.¹² Regarding bed capacity constraints, there is information in the public

¹² Application page 71

domain that suggests Mission's bed capacity constraints are due, at least in part, to insufficient clinical staffing.

As reported by Asheville Watchdog, HCA rewards its senior executives with bonuses and stock grants based on a formula weighted 20 percent on meeting standards for quality of patient care and 80 percent on hitting profit and share price targets.¹³ Critics, including some HCA shareholders, say the formula gives HCA executives an incentive to cut costs, often by reducing payrolls, at the expense of patient care.¹⁴

On April 21, 2022, registered nurses at Mission held a speak-out to demand that HCA ensure safe patient staffing in all units across the hospital. According to a registered nurse at Mission, "Right now, our nurses are being forced to care for too many sick patients at one time, without adequate support staff. This lack of staff means that patients are forced to wait to get care, to get pain medications, or to get help walking to the restroom. These delays can lead to infections, bed sores, falls, and other negative outcomes. This is not fair to our patients, all of whom deserve to be treated as if they were a member of our own family."¹⁵

On August 25 2022, registered nurses from Mission Hospital held a rally "to protest management's refusal to address chronic short staffing that jeopardizes patient safety."¹⁶

A January 12, 2023 NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt segment and accompanying report highlighted Mission Hospital and former and current nurses as part of a larger investigation into working and patient conditions at HCA Healthcare. NBC also spoke to former Mission nurse, Kelley Tyler. Tyler, 58, a member of the recently formed National Nurses United union at Mission Hospital in Asheville, worked at Mission for 37 years and left in April 2022. The report stated Tyler still keeps in touch with current employees and confirmed in an interview with NBC that patient care had been "jeopardized" by short staffing.¹⁷

On January 26, 2023, registered nurses from Mission rallied again outside the hospital to call for safe staffing levels. Kerri Wilson, a registered nurse at Mission told news outlet WLOS, "The problem is, there's no nurses upstairs in the other parts of the hospital, so it just causes backup. Every day, we're having beds that aren't being utilized for patients, and so, that means that patients can't leave the ER, and so there are days where there's well over 100 patients just waiting."¹⁸

On April 10, 2023, registered nurses from Mission rallied again outside the hospital to highlight their patient safety concerns, including increased incidents of workplace violence, broken hospital equipment, and unsafe staffing levels. "During my tenure as a cardiovascular intensive care unit (CVICU) nurse at Mission Hospital, I have seen the quality of care diminish so rapidly," said Katlin Myers, CVICU RN. "The cardiovascular ICU has some of the most vulnerable patients, yet we are consistently given more patients than nurses can safely handle. HCA must put our patients first."¹⁹

¹³ <https://avlwatchdog.org/profits-are-up-at-hca-ratings-are-down-at-mission/>

¹⁴ <https://www.bpr.org/news/2021-05-21/quality-of-care-concerns-rise-at-mission-hospital>

¹⁵ <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/mission-hospital-rns-to-demand-safe-staffing>

¹⁶ <https://www.asheville.com/news/2022/08/mission-hospital-nurses-to-hold-rally-for-patient-safety-concerns-on-thursday-aug-25th/>

¹⁷ <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2023/01/16/mission-asheville-hca-highlighted-in-nbc-report-on-nursing-shortages/69806885007/>

¹⁸ <https://wlos.com/news/local/nurses-rally-outside-mission-hospital-again-push-for-safe-staffing-understaffed-dangerous-national-day-of-action-united-national-attention-nightly-news-lester-holt-emergency-department>

¹⁹ <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/mission-hospital-nurses-to-hold-rally-over-hca-failure-to-protect-patients-and-nurses>

Mountain Maladies includes a Facebook group and Twitter account created for individuals to share their first-person experiences with Mission Hospital and its regional satellite organizations. Its stated goal is to provide healthcare advocacy in western North Carolina. The following posts regarding staffing at Mission Hospital were obtained from the Mountain Maladies Facebook page.

“I work in the travel nurse in the ER at Mission....They have a board in the break room (which is a joke cause we don't get breaks) and we have these “stop light reports”things they are doing, plan to do, and want to do.....I have been seeing this “free” standing ER in our yellow light report for weeks...all I can think is why are they building another ER when they don't staff and do take care of what they have....this ER is 90+ beds....they only use maybe 25 for actual ER patients and the rest is used to hold patients waiting for beds on the floors....so yes they have been days I've walked in to 60+ patients waiting for beds...if you build a free standing ER it will just turn into another building holding patients now needing transfer to the main campus.”

-ER Nurse
May 17, 2023

“I work in one of the ICUs at Mission for many years and have seen how Mission has declined especially after HCA. What I'm writing about is staffing. As I'm sure most know, alot, alot of nurses left after HCA took over. They've previously plugged holes with travelers, however, they're cutting back on them. Also, there was an incentive in place to encourage nurses to pick up extra shifts because we're still severely understaffed despite what HCA is telling the public. Instead of paying nurses for their time to come and help out, HCA would rather block rooms and have patients stay in the ER for many hours including overnight, in some cases. One of the other ICUs had almost their entire floor blocked because of lack of staff. My unit normally has to staff other units because the other units are less staffed than we are. The lack of incentive to pick up extra shifts will affect patient care. It means that we will have more patients per nurse than should be which means care will be affected. We do our best, but HCA presents nothing but road blocks. They are even taking our CNAs and making them answer phones instead of helping with patient care. Without proper staffing, there's only so much we can do.”

-Mission ICU Nurse
May 14, 2023

A nurse looks very stressed at the nurse's station, raising their voice on the phone. They are calling multiple supervisors for help, to be told that they didn't have another nurse to send to help them care for patients that they already have. Patients that are there for an acute, life altering position in their medical health journey. That nurse, getting calls from other departments, also swamped, trying to get a patient to their unit. But the nurse had to deny beds for other ill patients that could benefit from their specialty care because they don't even have the staff to help someone get out of bed or complete bed positioning changes to prevent pressure ulcers because HCA cut staff and/or doesn't pay enough to keep staff that remain. If you don't have family watching, your friends or family won't get adequate medical care at Mission. I don't blame staff for this. They didn't ask for any of this and advocate for best care practices to be denied over and over. I was very sad, for the nurses and all the medical teams there, for our entire community, and also for my friend who I knew was there, in a coma, that couldn't speak. Our government is really just looking the other way here. I won't mince words;

people have been bought in government and this system is allowed to exist. People were bought off and the Mission/HCA deal was approved. Our community was fleeced by predators. We have pictures of hospital rooms left with blood from another patient for weeks and nothing is cleaned. People are dying due to these changes, from a pressure ulcer turning into necrotizing bacteria, to unclean rooms causing a blood borne pathogen, to malpractice due to caregiver burnout and not having staff to really care for the many needs present. Nothing will change until the government officials decide health care results are more important than money for one segment of the population. People shouldn't be profit centers or products. But I guess our voting population has to feel that way too. I'm all over the place here. It is my rambling experience of what I see and feel to be true. God bless all the Mission Health workers and may they see the day when HCA's neglectful and willfully violent care guidelines are tossed in the wastebasket of time.

-Mission Visitor
March 19, 2022

Figure 16 on Mission FSER West application page 65 indicates that Mission’s inpatient admissions and days of care decreased nearly five percent from FY2021 to FY2022.

Table 8: Mission Occupancy Rates

	FY 2021	FY 2022	Change
Admissions	41,492	39,470	-4.9%
Patient Days	224,049	223,701	-0.2%
ALOS	5.4	5.7	
Average Daily Census	615	586	
Licensed Beds	733	733	
% Occupancy	83.9%	79.9%	-4.8%

Source: Application page 65, Figure 16

Mission attempts to inflate its occupancy rate with observation days; however, Mission operates 27 unlicensed observation beds to accommodate the needs of observation patients.²⁰ Therefore, the Agency should disregard the row titled “Occupancy with Observation Days” in Figure 16 presented on application page 65.

Figure 19 on application page 68 provides details regarding average hold hours per patient in the ED. Mission contends the trend in admitted patients held in the ED supports the need for the FSER West. However, the proposed FSER West project will do nothing to reduce the number of patients waiting in a Mission ED for inpatient admission. Without incremental acute care bed capacity in Buncombe County, patients will continue to be held in an ED until admission. In other words, the Mission FSER West project represents a \$29.4M capital expenditure to hold ED patients in west Asheville until they can be admitted to Mission hospital.

²⁰ 2023 License Renewal Application

As previously stated, AdventHealth Asheville is approved to develop a new acute care hospital with 67 acute care beds in Buncombe County. The addition of a new provider of acute care services will decompress capacity constraints at Mission Hospital by developing needed incremental acute care capacity and providing patients an alternative choice for acute care services in Buncombe County. The project timetable for AdventHealth Asheville intended to begin development the new hospital immediately after receiving its certificate of need, which would bring a new hospital to Buncombe County in 2025; however, Mission is stalling development of AdventHealth Asheville by appealing the Agency’s decision. Therefore, Mission’s purported claims of capacity constraints could be promptly remediated by withdrawing its appeal of AdventHealth Asheville’s approved project.

The answer to Mission’s stated acute care capacity constraints is not to spend \$29.4M to build a FSER in West Asheville. Mission could focus on appropriately staffing its existing acute care services and withdraw from costly administrative appeal proceedings.

Trend in Mission ED Volume

Mission falsely claims that its ED volume has “rebounded” since 2020. Figure 27 on application 77 calculates Mission’s percentage growth and CAGR for ED visits during 2020-2022 in an effort to demonstrate a trend of growth. AdventHealth would note Mission’s use of 2020 as a baseline to calculate the change in ED utilization artificially inflates the stated growth rate because 2020 volumes were admittedly impacted by COVID. The following table summarizes Mission’s historical ED volume and clearly indicates its post-COVID ED utilization has yet to surpass 2019 ED utilization.

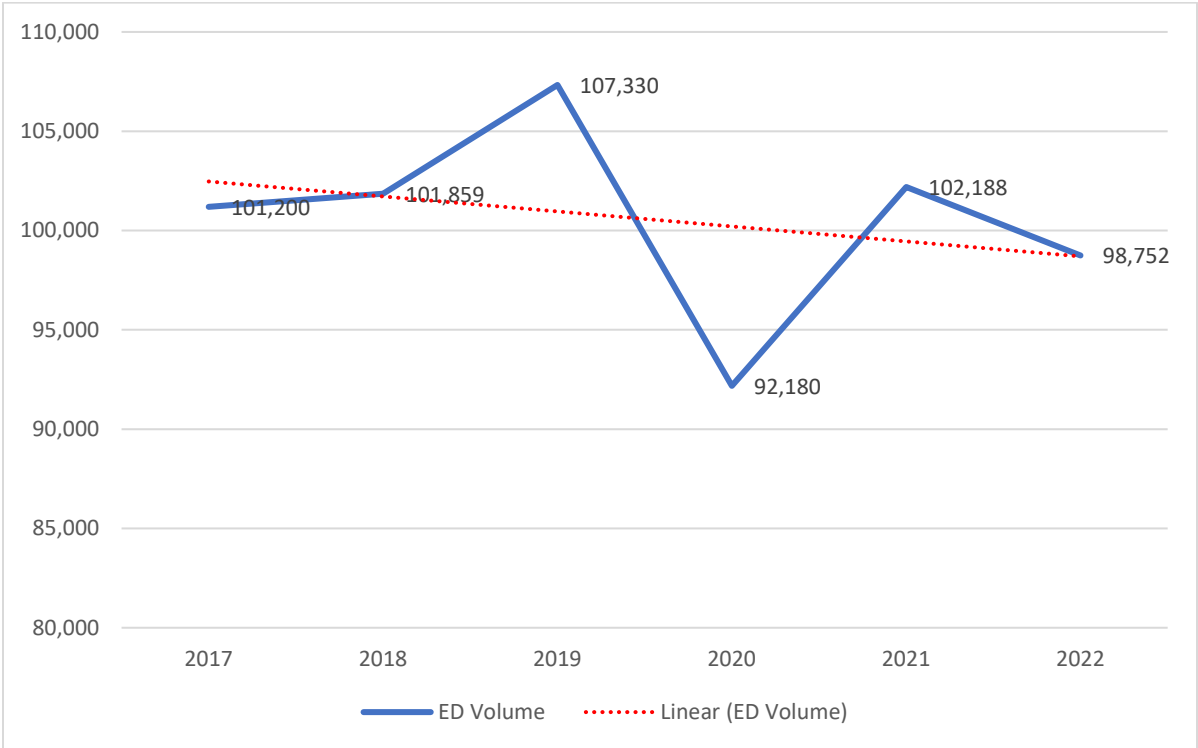
Table 9: Mission ED Volume

Year	ED Visits
CY2019	107,330
CY2020	92,180
CY2021	102,188
CY2022	98,752
19-22 % Growth	-8.0%
19-22 CAGR %	-2.7%

Source: Figure 27, application page 77

The redline in the following graph illustrates the actual linear trend in Mission’s historical ED volume.

Figure 3: Historical Trend in Mission ED Visits



The previous table and graph are based on information presented in the Mission FSER West application which cannot be verified. Therefore, AdventHealth also reviewed publicly available data from Mission’s annual hospital license renewal applications.

Table 10: Mission ED Volume

Year	ED Visits
FFY2019	104,401
FFY2020	95,085
FFY2021	98,818
FFY2022	98,845
19-22 % Growth	-5.3%
19-22 CAGR %	-1.8%

Source: Mission Hospital License Renewal Applications

AdventHealth would note there is a significant discrepancy between the CY2021 ED visits provided in the Mission FSER West application (102,188) and the FFY2021 ED visits reported in Mission 2022 license renewal application (98,818). Mission’s publicly available FFY2021 ED visit data is 3,370 visits lower

compared to the CY2021 data provided in the FSER West application. Mission did not provide a reason for the discrepancy in its application.

Mission’s lack of volume growth in its Emergency Department, despite increasing from 56, to 61, to 65 to 94 rooms since 2012 is evidenced by the following information from its License Renewal Applications.

Table 11: Mission Hospital - Historical ED Utilization

<i>LRA Year</i>	<i>Exam Rooms</i>	<i>ED Visits</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>ED Visits / Room</i>
2011	89	100,299		1,127
2012	56	99,656	-0.6%	1,780
2013	61	101,579	1.9%	1,665
2014	61	101,632	0.1%	1,666
2015	61	99,497	-2.1%	1,631
2016	61	96,208	-3.3%	1,577
2017	65	96,127	-0.1%	1,479
2018	65	101,629	5.7%	1,564
2019	65	102,245	0.6%	1,573
2020	65	104,401	2.1%	1,606
2021	94	95,085	-8.9%	1,012
2022	94	98,818	3.9%	1,051
2023	94	98,845	0.0%	1,052

Source: Mission Hospital License Renewal Applications

Therefore, despite all of Mission’s protestations to the contrary, the actual data from its License Renewal Applications show that there has been essentially no increase in the number of patients seen in its ER in a decade, while at the same time Mission has increased the number of exam rooms by nearly 68% (38 additional rooms) since 2012.

Mission’s ED visit data for the identified FSER West service area similarly fails to demonstrate a rebound to pre-pandemic volumes.

Table 12: Mission Hospital - Historical Trend in Service Area ED Volume

ZIP Code	2017	2018	2019	17-19 CAGR	2020	2021	2022	21-22 % Change
28806 - Buncombe	12,962	12,891	12,921	-0.2%	10,918	12,203	12,024	-1.5%
28715 - Buncombe	7,304	7,559	7,786	3.2%	6,307	6,969	6,528	-2.2%
28748 - Buncombe	3,901	3,913	4,188	3.6%	3,425	3,732	3,471	-2.3%
<i>Primary Service Area</i>	<i>24,167</i>	<i>24,363</i>	<i>24,895</i>	<i>1.5%</i>	<i>20,650</i>	<i>22,904</i>	<i>22,023</i>	<i>-1.8%</i>
28801 - Buncombe	8,455	8,872	8,871	2.4%	7,483	7,701	7,723	-1.8%
28787 - Buncombe	4,956	4,998	5,367	4.1%	4,275	4,692	4,569	-1.6%
28805 - Buncombe	4,560	4,749	4,766	2.2%	4,019	4,409	4,178	-1.7%
28804 - Buncombe	4,246	4,533	4,442	2.3%	3,592	4,173	3,999	-1.2%
28753 - Madison	3,088	2,961	3,089	0.0%	2,408	2,846	2,794	-2.0%
28716 - Haywood	1,654	1,716	1,791	4.1%	1,466	1,784	1,712	0.7%
28701 - Buncombe	1,083	1,066	1,116	1.5%	935	1,138	1,091	0.1%
<i>Secondary Service Area</i>	<i>28,042</i>	<i>28,895</i>	<i>29,442</i>	<i>2.5%</i>	<i>24,178</i>	<i>26,743</i>	<i>26,066</i>	<i>-1.5%</i>
28786 - Haywood	1,210	1,299	1,312	4.1%	1,263	1,580	1,500	4.4%
28721 - Haywood	671	737	729	4.2%	529	797	745	2.1%
28743 - Madison	492	478	528	3.6%	378	449	446	-1.9%
28785 - Haywood	352	389	382	4.2%	308	449	425	3.8%
28745 - Haywood	62	67	69	5.5%	48	75	60	-0.7%
<i>Tertiary Service Area</i>	<i>2,787</i>	<i>2,970</i>	<i>3,020</i>	<i>4.1%</i>	<i>2,526</i>	<i>3,350</i>	<i>3,176</i>	<i>2.6%</i>
Total Service Area	54,996	56,228	57,357	2.1%	47,354	52,997	51,265	-1.4%

Source: Figures 29 & 30, application pages 80-81

As shown in the previous table, Mission’s ED visits for the FSER West service area have yet to surpass the threshold of Mission’s 2017 ED volume. Clearly, Mission has failed to demonstrate a “rebound” to pre-pandemic ED volumes based on a review of historical data for the Mission main campus ED and the volume of ED visits served from the FSER West service area.

Mission attempts to rationalize its decreasing ED volume by citing a survey taken from 30 healthcare executives during January-February 2021.²¹ It is important to understand that a survey is not the same as a case study. A survey obtains information from a sample to gather thoughts on a particular topic, whereas a case study investigates a circumstance over a period of time. Relative to the cited survey, Mission states on application page 78, “hospitals expected ED visit volume to return to baseline (2019 volumes) by 2022 and to increase approximately 5 percent over baseline levels in 2023.” However, Mission is merely reciting the opinions of hospital administrators during a two-month period in 2021. There was no scientific study conducted to actually analyze historical or future trends in ED utilization. Mission is simply citing what other health systems speculate will happen in the future; however, there is zero statistical evidence that such ponderings will come to fruition. Additionally, Mission conveniently failed to reference a key take away from the survey which found that “lower emergency department volumes could be a long-term trend.” McKinsey & Company, which conducted the survey also stated, “while ED volumes are starting to recover in the most recent quarter, many health systems expect ED volumes to remain below historical

²¹ Application page 78

baselines for a while if not indefinitely as lower acuity patients seek other channels of care such as urgent care, primary care offices, and virtual care visits. What we expect is for hospitals to change their channel strategy. They will likely decrease the size of their ED footprint and increase in-person access points in the community such as urgent care and primary care as well as adopt digital offerings to make care more convenient.”²²

Application page 78 states another survey found “hospital volumes across all regions have returned to near 2019 levels.” However, Mission is again citing a survey conducted over four days in February 2022. Further, the summary of the February 2022 survey did not reference any information regarding emergency department visits.²³ AdventHealth would also note the quote Mission utilized from the February 2022 survey was carefully worded to say, “near 2019 levels.” Because Mission cited a survey and not a case study, there is no actual data to support the statements.

In summary, for the reasons previously stated, Mission failed to adequately demonstrate the need the population has for the proposed FSER. Consequently, Mission should be found nonconforming to Criterion (3).

Assumptions & Methodology for Projected ED Patients

Mission’s methodology for projecting ED patients is premised on unreasonable and unrealistic assumptions. The following describes the flaws and shortcomings observed in Mission’s methodology.

Step 1: Calculate Historical Trend in Service Area ED Volume From 2017-2019

Step 1 of Mission’s methodology calculates the historical trend in service area ED volume from 2017 to 2019. The FSER service area volume trend was 1.4 percent from 2017 to 2019. See Figure 30, page 81.

Figure 19 on application page 62 shows 2021 with a decline in visits compared to 2017, 2018, and 2019.

²² <https://www.healthleadersmedia.com/clinical-care/hospital-service-volumes-expected-rebound-survey-finds>

²³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare/our-insights/survey-us-hospital-patient-volumes-move-back-towards-2019-levels>

Table 13: Mission Hospital - Historical Trend in Service Area ED Volume

Zip Code - County	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 Annualized	19-22 Change
28806 - Buncombe	15,070	14,958	14,837	12,215	13,904	13,976	-5.8%
28715 - Buncombe	9,261	9,524	9,721	7,775	8,680	8,732	-10.2%
28748 - Buncombe	4,700	4,837	5,039	3,974	4,462	4,195	-16.7%
<i>Primary Service Area</i>	<i>29,031</i>	<i>29,319</i>	<i>29,597</i>	<i>23,964</i>	<i>27,046</i>	<i>26,903</i>	<i>-9.1%</i>
28801 - Buncombe	9,115	9,612	9,756	8,075	8,302	8,428	-13.6%
28787 - Buncombe	5,664	5,742	5,972	4,722	5,357	5,313	-11.0%
28805 - Buncombe	5,125	5,338	5,337	4,520	4,911	4,828	-9.5%
28804 - Buncombe	4,863	5,174	4,979	4,056	4,719	4,489	-9.8%
28753 - Madison	3,586	3,523	3,498	2,694	3,249	3,341	-4.5%
28716 - Haywood	7,302	7,745	7,576	6,147	6,743	6,624	-12.6%
28701 - Buncombe	1,233	1,218	1,261	1,035	1,310	1,284	1.8%
<i>Secondary Service Area</i>	<i>36,888</i>	<i>38,352</i>	<i>38,379</i>	<i>31,249</i>	<i>34,591</i>	<i>34,308</i>	<i>-10.6%</i>
28786 - Haywood	9,724	10,281	9,817	8,166	8,925	8,917	-9.2%
28721 - Haywood	4,634	4,840	4,460	3,444	4,096	4,135	-7.3%
28743 - Madison	675	701	759	544	599	601	-20.8%
28785 - Haywood	2,599	2,870	2,902	2,124	2,572	2,461	-15.2%
28745 - Haywood	481	439	489	293	385	420	-14.1%
<i>Tertiary Service Area</i>	<i>18,113</i>	<i>19,131</i>	<i>18,427</i>	<i>14,571</i>	<i>16,577</i>	<i>16,535</i>	<i>-10.3%</i>
Total Service Area	84,032	86,802	86,403	69,784	78,214	77,745	-10.0%

Source: Page 56, Figure 11 & Figure 12

The previous table shows 2022 with a decline in visits 10.0% from 2019.

AdventHealth notes that during the three years since HCA Healthcare purchased Mission Health, scores of physicians have left the HCA system, and several primary care clinics have closed.²⁴ In 2022, two more prominent physician groups left Mission Health: seven doctors at Asheville Ear, Nose, & Throat and 10 surgeons at Carolina Spine & Neurosurgery Center.²⁵ Asheville Watchdog identified 223 doctors who appear to be no longer practicing at Mission; their names were on the Mission Find a Doctor website as of August 2019 but had been removed as of February 2022.²⁶ The 223 doctors no longer on Mission's Find A Doctor website include 33 family medicine physicians, 25 surgeons, and 15 pediatricians or

²⁴ Green, C. (2021, July 18). As Mission retreats, Pardee, AdventHealth fill primary care gap. Hendersonville Lightning.

²⁵ <https://avlwatchdog.org/how-many-doctors-have-left-mission-hca-wont-say/>

²⁶ According to Asheville Watchdog, the 223 doctors no longer on Mission's Find A Doctor site include 33 family medicine physicians, 25 surgeons, and 15 pediatricians or pediatric specialists. More than 100 doctors moved out of the state or region; others are listed as affiliated with hospitals in Hendersonville, the Charles George VA Medical Center in Asheville, or private practices, according to the North Carolina Medical Board and Internet searches.

pediatric specialists. Many of the physicians that have left Mission are now employed within Henderson County at AdventHealth or Pardee.

As previously described, Mission closed its primary care office in Candler effective October 20, 2020 leaving patients without local access to essential primary care services.²⁷ Recognizing the need to replenish access to primary care services, AdventHealth invested in the Candler community by establishing AdventHealth Medical Group Multispecialty at Candler in the same medical office building Mission vacated in 2020. AdventHealth Medical Group Multispecialty at Candler is located in zip code 28715, which is also included in the FSER West primary service area. Therefore, service area patients under the care of AdventHealth or Pardee physicians may no longer be seeking Mission healthcare services, as evidenced by the decreasing ED utilization.

Step 2: Project Market ED Volume Based on Historical Trends

Application page 82 states, “after 2022, it was assumed that general market growth would resume to pre-pandemic levels based on population growth and aging.” AdventHealth notes that population growth and aging has continued to occur in the service area during 2021 and 2022; however, ED utilization has not mirrored or even remotely followed population growth and aging trends during 2021 and 2022.

Despite a decreasing trend in ED volume from 2019 to 2022, Mission applied the respective 2017-2019 CAGRs by zip code to project ED market visits through 2028. As shown in the following table, Step 2 of Mission’s methodology results in the following ED service area volume during the initial project years.

Table 14: Projected Market ED Volume Based on Step 1 & Step 2 of FSER West Methodology

	Year	Service Area Market Visits
Historical	2018	86,802
	2019	86,403
	2020	69,784
	2021	78,214
	2022	77,745
	Projected	2023
2024		79,948
2025		81,115
2026		82,328
2027		83,588
2028		84,896

As evidenced by Mission’s methodology, ED market visits during 2028 are not expected to rebound to pre-pandemic volumes. In other words, Mission’s own methodology supports AdventHealth’s previously stated contention that Mission has failed to demonstrate the need the population has for the services proposed.

²⁷ <https://wlos.com/news/local/mission-health-to-stop-primary-care-services-in-biltmore-park-candler>

Step 3: Establish Base 2022 Mission Market Share by Zip Code

Step 3 of Mission’s methodology calculates 2022 market share based on 2022 Mission service area volume as a percent of total market volume. Mission states its 2022 market share will be the “starting point.” In other words, Mission assumes its 2022 ED visit market share by zip code will remain constant through the start of the project, i.e., July 2025. However, from 2019 to 2022, Mission has lost market share in all the zip codes identified for the primary service area and all but two of the zip codes identified in the secondary service area. Additionally, from 2021 to 2022, Mission lost market share in all but one of the zip codes identified for the FSER West service area.

Table 15: Mission ED Visit Market Share

ZIP Code	2019	2020	2021	2022	19-22 Change	21-22 Change
28806 - Buncombe	87.1%	89.4%	87.8%	86.0%	-1.1%	-1.7%
28715 - Buncombe	80.1%	81.1%	80.3%	74.8%	-5.3%	-5.5%
28748 - Buncombe	83.1%	86.2%	83.6%	82.7%	-0.4%	-0.9%
<i>Primary Service Area</i>	84.1%	86.2%	84.7%	81.9%	-2.3%	-2.8%
28801 - Buncombe	90.9%	92.7%	92.8%	91.6%	0.7%	-1.1%
28787 - Buncombe	89.9%	90.5%	87.6%	86.0%	-3.9%	-1.6%
28805 - Buncombe	89.3%	88.9%	89.8%	86.5%	-2.8%	-3.2%
28804 - Buncombe	89.2%	88.6%	88.4%	89.1%	-0.1%	0.7%
28753 - Madison	88.3%	89.4%	87.6%	83.6%	-4.7%	-4.0%
28716 - Haywood	23.6%	23.8%	26.5%	25.8%	2.2%	-0.6%
28701 - Buncombe	88.5%	90.3%	86.9%	85.0%	-3.5%	-1.9%
<i>Secondary Service Area</i>	76.7%	77.4%	77.3%	76.0%	-0.7%	-1.3%
28786 - Haywood	13.4%	15.5%	17.7%	16.8%	3.5%	-0.9%
28721 - Haywood	16.3%	15.4%	19.5%	18.0%	1.7%	-1.4%
28743 - Madison	69.6%	69.5%	75.0%	74.2%	4.6%	-0.7%
28785 - Haywood	13.2%	14.5%	17.5%	17.3%	4.1%	-0.2%
28745 - Haywood	14.1%	16.4%	19.5%	14.3%	0.2%	-5.2%
<i>Tertiary Service Area</i>	16.4%	17.3%	20.2%	19.2%	2.8%	-1.0%
Total	66.4%	67.9%	67.8%	65.9%	-0.4%	-1.8%

Source: Mission FSER West application: Figures 28, 29, 31

Despite a decreasing trend in volume and market share, Mission projects its ED market share throughout the service area will remain constant through July 2025. The application failed to provide a reasonable basis to justify why Mission’s decreasing trend in market share will stabilize.

Step 4: Establish Incremental Market Share and Projected FFY 1 through FFY 3 Volume

Step 4 of Mission’s methodology assumes an incremental market share gain will be added to its 2022 market share for each zip code identified in the primary service area. The incremental market shares are summarized in the following table.

Table 16: Incremental Market Share Due to FSER

Zip Code - County	2025	2026	2027	2028
PSA				
28806 - Buncombe	0.28%	0.55%	1.15%	1.75%
28715 - Buncombe	0.55%	1.15%	1.75%	2.35%
28748 - Buncombe	0.55%	1.15%	1.75%	2.35%

Source: Application page 86

The projected ED visit market share increases are based solely upon the development of the FSER West project. Mission failed to provide any additional rationale to describe the specific factors that support incremental ED market share increases within the primary service area. This is problematic because, as previously described, Mission projects to achieve incremental market share in areas for which it has experienced decreasing volume, i.e., zip codes 28806, 28715, and 28748. The zip codes in the primary service area comprise the largest volume of FSER West service area volume. Therefore, the presumption that market share will increase for these zip codes has a significant impact on projected volume for the proposed project.

Mission also failed to address the recent exodus of physicians from HCA and why it is reasonable to rely on historical data in the absence of its previous referral partners. During the three years since HCA Healthcare purchased Mission Health, scores of physicians have left the HCA system, and several primary care clinics have closed. Many of these physicians are now employed within Henderson County at AdventHealth or Pardee.

In summary, for the reasons previously described, Mission failed to demonstrate the need the population has for the services proposed and that projected utilization is based on reasonable and adequately supported assumptions. Similarly, medical equipment and observation days projections were based on projected ED volume, which was not reasonable and adequately supported. Consequently, the application does not conform to Criterion (3).

Criterion 4 *“Where alternative methods of meeting the needs for the proposed project exist, the applicant shall demonstrate that the least costly or most effective alternative has been proposed.”*

Mission failed to adequately demonstrate the need for the proposed services. See written comments regarding Criterion (3). A proposal that is not needed cannot be the most effective alternative. Consequently, the application is nonconforming to Criterion (4).

Criterion 5 *“Financial and operational projections for the project shall demonstrate the availability of funds for capital and operating needs as well as the immediate and long-term financial feasibility of the proposal, based upon reasonable projections of the costs of and charges for providing health services by the person proposing the service.”*

The assumptions used by Mission in preparation of the pro forma financial statements are not reasonable because projected utilization is not supported. The discussion regarding projected utilization found in Criterion (3) is incorporated herein by reference. Therefore, the applicant does not adequately

demonstrate that the financial feasibility of the proposal is based upon reasonable projections of costs and charges. Consequently, the application does not conform to this criterion.

Criterion 6 *“The applicant shall demonstrate that the proposed project will not result in unnecessary duplication of existing or approved health service capabilities or facilities.”*

Mission failed to adequately demonstrate the need for the proposed services. See written comments regarding Criterion (3). Therefore, Mission failed to adequately demonstrate that its proposal will not result in an unnecessary duplication of existing or approved emergency department services and is nonconforming to this criterion.

Mission states the proposed FSER will provide more timely access to critical care services in the west Buncombe County market and to patients in east Haywood and Madison County areas.²⁸

Mission acknowledges there is one hospital in Haywood County to the west, i.e., Duke LifePoint Haywood. However, Mission failed to demonstrate the proposed incremental emergency department services are needed in addition to the existing and approved health services in the service area. As previously described and shown in the following table, the number of ED visits in the Haywood County zip codes that are included in the FSER West service area have yet to rebound to pre-pandemic volumes.

Table 17: Historical Trend in ED Market Volume

Zip Code County	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	19-22 Change
28716 Haywood	7,302	7,745	7,576	6,147	6,743	6,624	-12.6%
28786 Haywood	9,724	10,281	9,817	8,166	8,925	8,917	-9.2%
28721 Haywood	4,634	4,840	4,460	3,444	4,096	4,135	-7.3%
28785 Haywood	2,599	2,870	2,902	2,124	2,572	2,461	-15.2%
28745 Haywood	481	439	489	293	385	420	-14.1%

Source: Figure 31, application page 82

Mission failed to consider the impact its proposed project will have on AdventHealth Asheville, which is approved to develop a new acute care hospital with 67 acute care beds and an emergency department with 12 treatment rooms. Further, Mission failed to account for the previously approved ED visit projections that will be served at Mission FSER Arden and AdventHealth Asheville. Mission’s oversight reflects a significant error in its 2023 FSER West application. Specifically, in Figure 39 (2023 FSER West application page 90) Mission projects 13,338 total market ED visits in zip code 28806 during 2028.²⁹ However, Mission’s total market projections for zip code 28806 are **less** than the total number of projected ED visits that will be served by Mission and AdventHealth Asheville. See the following table.

²⁸ Application page 116

²⁹ Total market visits mean the total number of ED visits originating from zip code 28806 served by all providers.

Table 18: Comparison of Total ED Market Visits to Total Projected ED Visits Served by Mission & AdventHealth Asheville, Zip Code 28806

Reference		2028
Table 5	Total Projected ED Visits by Mission & AdventHealth Asheville	14,903
2023 FSER West page 90, Fig. 39	Total ED Market Visits Based on 2023 Mission FSER West Methodology	13,338
Difference		-1,565

As shown in the previous table, the 2023 Mission FSER West project will unnecessarily duplicate existing and approved emergency services because the total projected number of ED visits to be served by existing and approved facilities exceeds Mission’s ED visit market projections for zip code 28806.

Even in a hypothetical scenario where AdventHealth Asheville’s projected ED visits are excluded from the analysis, Mission’s approved and proposed projects will gain 100% of the market share for zip code 28806.³⁰

Table 19: Mission Projected ED Visit Market Share: Zip Code 28806

Column	Project	2028
A	2022 Mission FSER Arden B-12191-22	1,569
B	2023 Mission FSER West B-12380-23	11,768
A + B = C	Total Mission ED Visits for Zip Code 28806	13,337
D	Total ED Market Visits Based on 2023 Mission FSER West Methodology	13,338
C ÷ D = E	Mission ED Visit Market Share for Zip Code 28806	100%

AdventHealth notes that the previous analysis excludes the ED patients from zip code 28806 that have historically been served by other existing facilities. Specifically, AdventHealth Hendersonville served 972 emergency department patients from zip code 28806 during FY2021. Mission’s methodology assumes AdventHealth Hendersonville will lose 100% of its historical market share as a result of the Mission FSER West project. Like many rural hospitals, AdventHealth Hendersonville’s emergency department is the

³⁰ AdventHealth does not concede that the ED visits included in the AdventHealth Asheville application should be excluded from the analysis. The hypothetical scenario is provided for illustrative purposes.

lifeblood of the facility, accounting for 89% of inpatient admissions. Therefore, what Mission may consider as small market share gains will actually have a detrimental impact on AdventHealth Hendersonville.

For all of the reasons contained in these comments, the application should be found nonconforming to Criterion (6).

Criterion 18a *“The applicant shall demonstrate the expected effects of the proposed services on competition in the proposed service area, including how any enhanced competition will have a positive impact upon the cost effectiveness, quality, and access to the services proposed; and in the case of applications for services where competition between providers will not have a favorable impact on cost-effectiveness, quality, and access to the services proposed, the applicant shall demonstrate that its application is for a service on which competition will not have a favorable impact.”*

Between April 2020 and April 2021, 116 people reached out to North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein regarding their dissatisfaction with Mission. According to WLOS, an American Broadcasting Corporation media outlet, the majority of complaints were related to billing issues, 23% were concerns over quality of care, 16% related to loss of services, 7% were from current or former employees of Mission, and 5% were regarding charity care.³¹

In a July 25, 2022, letter to the Agency with respect to the 67 acute care beds need in the SMFP Attorney General Josh Stein stated:

Currently, Mission has almost no competition for acute care in Buncombe County. The lack of competition is the result of Mission’s unique history. Mission effectively operated as a legislatively authorized monopoly for over twenty years, and no new hospitals have opened even after Mission’s arrangement with the State ended in 2016. This lack of competition harms residents of western North Carolina by increasing the cost, and reducing the quality, of health care services in the region.

<https://info.ncdhhs.gov/dhsr/coneed/comments/2022/june/Buncombe-Acute-Care-Beds-Project-ID-B-12232-22-Mission-Hospital-Comments-by-AG-Josh-Stein.pdf>).

Prior to its repeal in 2016, Mission was also subject to the only Certificate of Public Advantage (“COPA”) agreement entered into with the State of North Carolina. *To Oversee or Not to Oversee? Lessons from the Repeal of North Carolina’s Certificate of Public Advantage Law* <https://www.milbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/MMF-North-Carolina-COPA-Repeal-Issue-Brief-FINAL.pdf>).

As was explained by economist Gregory Vistnes, former Deputy Director for Antitrust for the U.S. Federal Trade Commission’s Bureau of Economics:

In late 1995, the only two acute-care hospitals in Asheville, North Carolina, merged to form Mission Hospital, an entity owned and operated by Mission Health Systems (“MHS”). [Specifically,

³¹ Zatkulak, Karen. “A concerning number,’ Attorney General describes recent Mission Health complaints filed” ABC 13 News, 8 June 2021 <https://wlos.com/news/local/josh-stein-hca-a-concerning-number-attorney-general-describes-recent-mission-health-complaints-filed>

“Memorial Mission Hospital and St. Joseph’s Hospital signed a cooperative agreement in December 1995 to manage and operate the two hospitals as an integrated entity. Three years later, Memorial Mission Hospital acquired St. Joseph’s Hospital under the ownership of Mission-St. Joseph’s Health System, Inc. In December 2003, Mission-St. Joseph’s Health System, Inc. was renamed Mission Health, Inc. and the merged hospitals were renamed Mission Hospital.”] Due to concerns that the merger would significantly increase Mission Hospital's market power in one or more markets in Western North Carolina ("WNC"), the State of North Carolina entered into a Certificate of Public Advantage ("COPA") agreement with the hospitals as a condition for allowing the merger to go forward. [the COPA defined the WNC markets as “the 17 county region consisting of Buncombe, Burke, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, and Yancey.”] *The regulatory requirements embodied in the COPA were designed to provide an offset to the competitive discipline being eliminated by the merger, thus helping to ensure that consumers would not face higher prices or reduced quality of care as a result of the merger.*

Gregory Vistnes, Ph.D, An Economic Analysis of the Certificate of Public Advantage (COPA) Agreement Between the State of North Carolina and Mission Health, Feb 10, 2011, p. 1, <https://mountainx.com/files/copareport.pdf>, last accessed 10/21/2022 (internal citations omitted, emphasis added). Dr. Vistnes went on to state:

[W]hile I do not independently seek to assess whether Mission Hospital has market power relating to inpatient hospital services that stems from the 1995 merger, the evidence I have seen is fully consistent with that assumption. Prior to the merger, Memorial Mission and St. Joseph likely provided significant competition to each other. These two hospitals were located only blocks away from each other, and were both viewed as large, full-service hospitals. Consistent with what I have learned from health insurers operating in the area, those two hospitals appear to have provided important competitive discipline to each other. In contrast, other hospitals in the WNC region appear to have provided, and continue to provide, substantially less competitive discipline to the Asheville hospitals. Thus, by merging Memorial Mission and St. Joseph, the most important competitive discipline facing these hospitals appears to have been lost, thereby creating substantial market power.

The facts are generally consistent with this assumption that Mission Hospital realized significant market power from the merger. While potentially a very imperfect proxy for market power, Mission Hospital’s share of inpatient discharges in several counties in WNC is consistent with the assumption that Mission Hospital enjoys substantial market power with respect to inpatient hospital services.

...

[Mission’s size and position as the sole provider of certain services] make it difficult for payers to substitute away from Mission Hospital to those other hospitals in the region Mission Hospital is also significantly different in several regards from neighboring hospitals, thus likely reducing payers' willingness to substitute from Mission Hospital to those other hospitals.

...

These data, as well as the information that I learned while interviewing physicians, health insurance providers and hospitals, are all consistent with the premise that Mission Hospital continues to enjoy substantial market power with respect to inpatient hospital services, and that this market power likely increased significantly as a result of the 1995 merger.

pp. 7-8

In an August 2022 report regarding the use of COPAs, the Federal Trade Commission said the following specifically with respect to Mission's successful efforts to repeal the COPA statute that constrained its monopoly powers and Mission's acquisition by HCA:

Mission Health System (North Carolina). In 2015, the North Carolina legislature repealed the state's COPA law after lobbying by Mission Health, and the Mission Health COPA ended in September 2016 – leaving no competitive or regulatory constraint on Mission Health's monopoly power in Asheville. In February 2019, Mission Health was acquired by the for-profit healthcare system HCA Healthcare – despite the fact that the COPA was originally approved, in part, to prevent out-of-state for-profit healthcare systems from acquiring the local hospitals. Empirical research on the price effects of the Mission Health COPA for inpatient hospital services from 1996 to 2008 shows that Mission Health increased its prices by at least 20% more than peer hospitals during the COPA period, suggesting that despite the margin and cost regulations, state COPA oversight did not prevent Mission Health from raising prices more than similar hospitals. A second study found an average price increase of 25% through 2015, driven by large increases several years into the COPA period. It also found prices increased by another 38% after the COPA was repealed in 2015 and before Mission Health was acquired by HCA Healthcare – indicating the post-COPA price increase likely reflects the removal of the COPA oversight rather than the conversion to a for-profit hospital system. In addition, an attorney from the North Carolina Attorney General's office, responsible for overseeing the Mission Health COPA for nearly 20 years, stated that he does not recommend using COPAs due to the potential for regulatory evasion during the COPA period, and the ability of hospitals to eventually be freed of COPA oversight, which leaves the community with an unregulated monopoly. And a healthcare economist hired to evaluate the Mission Health COPA in 2011 discussed the difficulty of designing a regulatory scheme that prevents evasion and is flexible enough to allow for industry changes over the full COPA duration.

FTC Policy Perspectives on Certificates of Public Advantage,
https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/ftc_gov/pdf/COPA_Policy_Paper.pdf

In August 2021, a class-action lawsuit was filed in North Carolina state court against HCA Healthcare and Mission Health, alleging anti-competitive practices in violation of the North Carolina Constitution and antitrust and consumer protection laws. Plaintiffs, who are North Carolina patients, claim that Tennessee-based HCA used market power garnered from the cross-market merger to demand anticompetitive terms in contracts with insurers, including tying, all-or-nothing, anti-steering, and gag clauses, driving up prices and insurance premiums. The Plaintiffs claim that even prior to the merger, Mission Health was shielded by North Carolina's COPA and used similar anti-competitive tactics.³² The lawsuit claims that because Mission has 90% of the market share, the hospital is able to contract for "excessive prices being billed directly and indirectly" to people across Western North Carolina. A copy of the complaint is included in Attachment D. State Representative Brian Turner and State Senators Julie Mayfield and Kevin Corbin

³² Gu, Amy. "North Carolina Class Action Sues HCA/Mission Health for Anticompetitive Contracting Practices." The Source Blog, 11 August 2021 <https://sourceonhealthcare.org/class-action-lawsuit-in-north-carolina-alleges-monopoly-and-all-or-nothing-contracting-practices/>

voiced support for the lawsuit issuing a joint statement that references Mission's use of monopolistic bargaining, downgraded quality of care, and reduced access to health care, especially in rural areas.³³

In an opinion released September 19 2022, Judge Mark Davis partially denied HCA and Mission's motion to dismiss the class-action lawsuit, stating "(T)he Complaint's allegations in the present case, as discussed extensively above, sufficiently identify anticompetitive practices in which Defendants have engaged during their negotiations with commercial insurers leading, among other things, to higher insurance premiums for consumers along with denial of access to information regarding price and quality as to Defendants' facilities so as to establish their standing to advance their antitrust claims in this action."

In June 2022, the city of Brevard (Transylvania County) filed a lawsuit against HCA alleging that the hospital operator engaged in an "anticompetitive scheme involving the illegal maintenance and enhancement of monopoly power" in the acute care hospital and outpatient care markets in seven counties in North Carolina. This is the second antitrust case filed against HCA in North Carolina in the past year. Transylvania Regional Hospital is in Brevard, the county's seat, and is one of five hospitals in Western North Carolina owned by HCA Healthcare and in the Mission Health regional system.³⁴

In July 2022, Buncombe County and the city of Asheville filed a joint class-action lawsuit against HCA Healthcare and Mission Health, alleging the companies have been involved in anti-competitive practices. The lawsuit was the third of its kind filed in less than a year by Western North Carolina entities. "The County Commissioners are concerned that HCA's business operations monopolize healthcare while artificially inflating prices, and self-insured organizations like ours have no other recourse," Buncombe County Board of Commissioners Chair Brownie Newman said in a news release.³⁵

While Mission has every right to be heard and to have its "day in Court," the cacophony of voices seeking the help for patients, physicians, and facilities in the region simply cannot be ignored. These voices are also echoed daily through local media outlets telling the stories of Mission's maladies. For example:

- <https://wlos.com/news/local/nurses-rally-outside-mission-hospital-again-push-for-safe-staffing-understaffed-dangerous-national-day-of-action-united-national-attention-nightly-news-lester-holt-emergency-department> (01/26/2023)
- <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/mission-hospital-nurses-to-hold-rally-over-hca-failure-to-protect-patients-and-nurses> (04/07/23)
- <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2023/01/16/mission-asheville-hca-highlighted-in-nbc-report-on-nursing-shortages/69806885007/> (01/16/23)
- <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2022/11/07/nurses-union-expressing-concerns-about-staffing-at-asheville-hospital> (11/07/22)

³³ Barrows, Kari and James, Andrew. "Group of NC Residents Files Antitrust Lawsuit Against HCA Healthcare." ABC 15 News. 10 August 2021. <https://wpde.com/news/local/group-of-nc-residents-file-antitrust-lawsuit-against-hca-healthcare>

³⁴ Jones, Andrew. "HCA, Mission hit with 2nd WNC antitrust suit in a year, this one from a Transylvania city." Asheville Citizen Times, 6 June 2022. <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2022/06/06/brevard-files-class-action-antitrust-lawsuit-against-mission-hca/7531321001/>

³⁵ Jones, Andrew. "Asheville, Buncombe file lawsuit against HCA/Mission Health, which vows to fight back." Asheville Citizen Times, 31 July 2022. <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2022/07/28/buncombe-asheville-filed-class-action-lawsuit-against-hca-healthcare-mission-health/10171852002/>

- <https://abc17news.com/cnn-regional/2022/08/18/unsafe-assignments-nurses-at-mission-hospital-share-concerns-over-staffing-levels/> (08/18/22)
- <https://wlos.com/news/local/weve-got-to-do-something-wncs-2-biggest-municipalities-take-on-hca-mission-asheville-buncombe-county-brevard-lawsuit-board-of-commissioners-chairman-brownie-newman-mayor-esther-manheimer> (07/28/22)
- <https://avlwatchdog.org/attorney-generals-office-had-great-concerns-mission-hca-deal-was-rigged-from-the-beginning/> (03/15/22)
- <https://mountainx.com/news/from-asheville-watchdog-profits-are-up-at-hca-ratings-are-down-at-mission/> (05/01/21)
- <https://my40.tv/news/local/lawsuit-against-mission-health-could-have-an-impact-nationwide-says-law-professor> (09/15/21)
- <https://www.facingsouth.org/2021/09/lawsuit-targets-hcas-hospital-monopoly-western-north-carolina> (09/01/21)
- <https://wlos.com/news/local/group-of-nc-residents-file-antitrust-lawsuit-against-hca-healthcare> (08/10/21)
- <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2021/09/20/hundreds-complain-nc-attorney-general-ashevilles-hca-mission/8370318002/> (6-9-21)
- <https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/finance/north-carolina-ag-gets-116-complaints-about-mission-health.html> (06/09/21)
- <https://wlos.com/news/local/josh-stein-hca-a-concerning-number-attorney-general-describes-recent-mission-health-complaints-filed> (06/08/21)
- <https://www.bpr.org/news/2021-05-21/quality-of-care-concerns-rise-at-mission-hospital> (05-21-21)
- <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2020/02/13/elected-officials-blast-hca-for-first-years-performance-at-mission/> (02/13/20)
- <https://carolinapublicpress.org/29762/irate-crowd-voices-frustrations-with-medical-services-in-cashiers/> (01/29/20)
- <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/opinion/2020/02/11/hcas-management-mission-health-hospital-cause-deep-concern/4721205002/> (02/12/20)

The project that is the subject of these comments is explicitly designed to bring more patients to Mission's acute care facilities Asheville. Mission is targeting existing and approved providers to duplicate their services, starve them of resources, and increase the scope and range of the monopoly that currently exists. While Mission claims that the project will not have a substantial impact on competition because it is simply seeking to off-load emergency visits from the Mission main ED (application page 142), there is no reason to believe that patients will not be drawn from other providers. If Mission is taken at its word, however, then the project will not enhance competition, and Mission has not identified how the project will promote cost-effectiveness, or why its application is for a service on which competition will not have a favorable impact.

Furthermore, the proposed FSER will increase the cost of healthcare in the identified service area. FSERs can increase costs for patients and employers. Many patients often confuse FSED's for urgent care

centers, leading to unexpected medical bills for minor illnesses and injuries. For patients who only have minor illnesses or injuries, mistaking a FSER for an urgent care or walk-in clinic can be extremely costly. A 2015 study estimated the cost of visiting a free-standing emergency room was \$2,199 compared to \$168 for a visit to an urgent care. Further complicating matters, FSERs often fail to disclose that they usually operate outside of insurance networks, further inflating patient costs.³⁶ Mission’s application provides no discussion regarding any prospective efforts to ensure appropriate utilization of the proposed FSER.

For these reasons and based on the facts which result in Mission being nonconforming with Criteria (3), (4), (5), and (6) it should also be found nonconforming with Criterion 18a.

Criterion 20 *“An applicant already involved in the provision of health services shall provide evidence that quality care has been provided in the past.”*

The Agency should consider publicly available data which documents Mission’s failure to provide quality care in the past.

Mission Hospital’s Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade scored a “B” grade during Spring 2021, Spring, 2020, and Spring 2019. Mission Hospital scored as low as a “C” grade during Fall 2019.

**Figure 4: Mission Hospital
Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grades**



Source: <https://www.hospitalsafetygrade.org/>

Since 2012, Leapfrog has released Safety Grades twice per year for nearly 3,000 hospitals across the U.S. To be as transparent as possible, Leapfrog makes past grades available. Examining past grades makes it clear which hospitals consistently achieve high standards of patient safety. According to Leapfrog, past grades can tell a lot about a hospital’s track record in keeping its patients safe from errors, injuries, accidents, and infections.

A small number of hospitals have consistently achieved "A" grades. AdventHealth Hendersonville is proud to have received consecutive “A” grades as demonstrated below.

³⁶ Longe, Edward. “It’s Time to Reform Free-Standing Emergency Rooms.” The American Consumer Institute Center for Citizen Research. 25 March 2021 <https://www.theamericanconsumer.org/2021/03/its-time-to-reform-free-standing-emergency-rooms/>

**Figure 5: AdventHealth Hendersonville
Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grades**



Source: <https://www.hospitalsafetygrade.org/>

Another quality assessment tool is the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey which asks a random sample of recently discharged patients about their hospital care experience like how well nurses and doctors communicated, how responsive hospital staff were to their needs, and the cleanliness and quietness of the hospital environment. HCAHPS is required by CMS (the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) for all hospitals in the United States. The HCAHPS star ratings summarize patient experience, which is one aspect of hospital quality. **More stars mean better quality care.** Healthcare consumers can use the star ratings along with other quality information when making decisions about choosing a hospital.³⁷

Mission scored only two stars (out of five) for the most recent patient survey rating. In comparison, AdventHealth Hendersonville scored four stars. Mission's HCAHPS scores are all well below state and national benchmarks. The following table summarizes Mission's patient survey star ratings and average survey responses.

³⁷ <https://www.medicare.gov/care-compare/resources/hospital/patient-survey-rating>

Table 20: HCAHPS Patient Survey Ratings

	Mission	AdventHealth Hendersonville	NC Average	National Average
Overall Patient Survey Rating	★ ★	★ ★ ★ ★		
Patients who reported that their nurses "Always" communicated well.	69%	78%	79%	79%
Patients who reported that their doctors "Always" communicated well.	74%	81%	80%	80%
Patients who reported that they "Always" received help as soon as they wanted.	45%	60%	66%	63%
Patients who reported that the staff "Always" explained about medicines before giving it to them.	54%	61%	62%	62%
Patients who reported that their room and bathroom were "Always" clean.	52%	70%	72%	69%
Patients who reported that the area around their room was "Always" quiet at night.	56%	64%	62%	61%
Patients who reported that YES, they were given information about what to do during their recovery at home.	81%	90%	86%	86%
Patients who "Strongly Agree" they understood their care when they left the hospital.	40%	54%	51%	50%
Patients who gave their hospital a rating of 9 or 10 on a scale from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest).	54%	74%	71%	68%
Patients who reported YES, they would definitely recommend the hospital.	49%	79%	69%	67%
No. of Completed Surveys	403	539		

Source: Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), Hospital Compare. Accessed May 30, 2023

The N.C. Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Division (OSH) performed three inspections in October and November 2021 at Mission Hospital, resulting in nearly \$30,000 of civil penalties. In addition to failing to fit employees for N95 respirators properly, OSH investigators said the hospital waited to report that one of its workers had been hospitalized with COVID-19 and later died.³⁸

According to the NCDOL citation, "the employer did not ensure that the employee(s) using a tight-fitting facepiece respirator were fit tested prior to initial use of the respirator, whenever a different respirator facepiece ... were used." Hannah Drummond, an emergency room nurse at Mission and the chief nurse representative with the local chapter of National Nurses United reported, "the fit-test issues stemmed from a lack of oversight."³⁹

³⁸ <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/coronavirus/article259696570.html#storylink=cpy>

³⁹ <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2022/03/23/mission-hca-citations-show-ppe-and-covid-death-reporting-failures/7139196001/>

One of the citations also indicates the hospital did not report an employee's October 18, 2021 COVID-related hospitalization and subsequent death until nurses filed a complaint on November 22, 2021. Hospital officials are required to report each work-related COVID death to OSH within eight hours. The employee died on November 10, 2021, according to the citation, OSH was not notified until November 22, 2021. According to an article published in Cardinal & Pine, the employee was a nurse in a COVID ward.⁴⁰

Mission Hospital staff have been vocal regarding their safety concerns. In June and September 2021 and February 2022, the labor union representing registered nurses at Mission Hospital staged protests to call attention to what it called “patient safety and unsafe working conditions” at Mission Hospital. Among other complaints, the National Nurses Organizing Committee of National Nurses United asserted that HCA Healthcare-owned Mission Hospital scheduled symptomatic, COVID-positive nurses to work at the hospital and failed to provide nurses with adequate masks, gowns, gloves, and other personal protective equipment. “Since HCA purchased our hospital in 2019, the management has cut corners on safe patient care by cutting support staff and violating their own nurse staffing grids,” said Shelby Runkles, a cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit RN at Mission. “With each additional patient, nurses are more prone to make mistakes and the risk of serious complications increases.”⁴¹

In August 2022, registered nurses from Mission Hospital held a rally “to protest management’s refusal to address chronic short staffing that jeopardizes patient safety.”⁴²

On January 26, 2023, registered nurses from Mission Hospital rallied again outside the hospital to call for safe staffing levels.

On April 10, 2023, registered nurses from Mission Hospital rallied again outside the hospital to highlight their patient safety concerns, including increased incidents of workplace violence, broken hospital equipment, and unsafe staffing levels.

The repeat demonstrations of staff nurses rallying for safe staffing levels are legitimate evidence of Mission’s failure to provide quality care.

⁴⁰ <https://cardinalpine.com/story/nc-fines-asheville-hospital-30000-after-nurses-complain-of-covid-risks/>

⁴¹ <https://avlwatchdog.org/barks/nurses-to-picket-mission-hospital-citing-concerns-about-safety/>

⁴² <https://www.asheville.com/news/2022/08/mission-hospital-nurses-to-hold-rally-for-patient-safety-concerns-on-thursday-aug-25th/>

ATTACHMENT A



NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**

ROY COOPER • Governor
KODY H. KINSLEY • Secretary
MARK PAYNE • Director, Division of Health Service Regulation

VIA EMAIL ONLY

January 2, 2023

Kenneth Burgess
kburgess@bakerdonelson.com

No Review

Record #: 4106
Date of Request: December 9, 2022
Facility Name: Mission Hospital
FID #: 943349
Business Name: MH Mission Hospital, LLLP
Business #: 3045
Project Description: Acquire a CT scanner
County: Buncombe

Dear Mr. Burgess:

The Healthcare Planning and Certificate of Need Section, Division of Health Service Regulation (Agency) received your correspondence regarding the project described above. Based on the CON law **in effect on the date of this response to your request**, the project as described is not governed by, and therefore, does not currently require a certificate of need. If the CON law is subsequently amended such that the above referenced proposal would require a certificate of need, this determination does not authorize you to proceed to develop the above referenced proposal when the new law becomes effective.

This determination is binding only for the facts represented in your correspondence. If changes are made in the project or in the facts provided in the correspondence referenced above, a new determination as to whether a certificate of need is required would need to be made by this office.

Please do not hesitate to contact this office if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ena Lightbourne, Project Analyst

Micheala Mitchell, Chief

cc: Acute and Home Care Licensure and Certification Section, DHSR
Radiation Protection Section, DHSR

NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • DIVISION OF HEALTH SERVICE REGULATION
HEALTHCARE PLANNING AND CERTIFICATE OF NEED SECTION

LOCATION: 809 Ruggles Drive, Edgerton Building, Raleigh, NC 27603
MAILING ADDRESS: 809 Ruggles Drive, 2704 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-2704
<https://info.ncdhhs.gov/dhsr/> • TEL: 919-855-3873

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY / AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EMPLOYER

KENNETH LEE BURGESS, SHAREHOLDER
Direct Dial: 919.294.0802
Direct Fax: 919.338.7696
E-Mail Address: kburgess@bakerdonelson.com

December 9, 2022

VIA E-MAIL

Micheala Mitchell, Chief
Ena Lightbourne, Project Analyst
N.C. Department of Health and Human Services
N.C. Division of Health Service Regulation
Certificate of Need Section
809 Ruggles Drive, Raleigh, N.C. 27603

RE: *Notice of Exemption for the Redesign and Renovation of MH Mission Hospital, LLLP's Emergency Room*

Dear Micheala and Ena:

I am writing on behalf of our client MH Mission Hospital, LLLP ("Mission") to provide the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Health Service Regulation, Certificate of Need Section ("the CON Section" or "the Agency") with prior written notice of Mission Hospital's plans to redesign its existing Emergency Room ("ER") at the Mission main hospital, as described further below (the "Project"). For the reasons set forth below, we do not believe that the Project is subject to review by the Agency or that Mission is required to obtain a certificate of need ("CON") before proceeding with the Project because the Project qualifies for an exemption pursuant to N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g).

Background

In 2021, Mission handled approximately 101,000 ER visits. The current Mission ER was developed by the former owners of Mission Hospital and so was acquired "as is" when HCA Healthcare acquired Mission Hospital in 2019. The current size and layout of the ER has proven challenging for patients, physicians and staff. The purpose of the Project is to redesign certain components of the main ER to optimize patient flow, patient experience and overall operations of the ER. The Project will also address the special needs of Behavioral Health ("BH") ER patients.

The Project will be developed in two phases and involves the following:

- Acquisition of a new CT Scanner to augment to Mission's existing 2 ER-based CT Scanners, discussed further below, to optimize patient flow;
- Renovate existing space to:
 - Relocate the existing EMS lounge;
 - Create a renovated pediatric ER pod;
 - Create a renovated 24-hour BH pod with intake rooms, a security work area and related support space; and

- Renovate and upgrade other portions of the existing ER to maximize space and efficiency.

For the reasons stated below, this redesign and renovation of Mission Hospital's main ER is exempt from CON Section review, and thus does not require that Mission obtain a CON, pursuant to N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g). See Attachment 1 (diagrams showing the location of Mission's existing ER and the space to be renovated). The anticipated capital costs for the Project are \$12,724,000.00. See Attachment 2 (Capital Cost Worksheet).

Applicable Legal Authorities

The CON Law precludes any person from offering or developing a "new institutional health service" without first obtaining a CON. N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-178(a). The definition of "new institutional health service" includes, *inter alia*, the following:

- Incurring an obligation for a capital expenditure that exceeds \$4,000,000.00 to develop or expand a health service or health service facility, or which "relates" to the provision of a health service.

N.C. Gen. Stat. §§ 131E-176(16)(b). However, the CON Law includes a specific exemption for health-related capital expenditures in excess of \$2,000,000.00 where the sole purpose of the capital expenditure is "to renovate, replace on the same site, or expand the entirety or a portion of an existing health service facility located on the main campus." N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g). That exemption, where applicable, eliminates the need to obtain a CON before incurring the capital expenditure. The Project which is the subject of this Exemption Notice involves a capital expenditure in excess of \$2,000,000.00. The estimated total capital cost for the project is \$12,724,000.00. However, the project is exempt from CON Section review based upon the exemption at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g).

The Statutory Exemption For Renovation, Replacement Or Expansion Of An Existing Health Facility On The Same Campus

N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g) provides an express exemption from CON Section review for capital expenditures that exceed \$2,000,000.00 where:

1. The sole purpose of the capital expenditure is to renovate, replace on the same site, or expand the entirety or a portion of an existing health service facility located on the main campus;
2. So long as the capital expenditure does not result in:
 - a. A change in bed capacity as defined in G.S. 131E-176(5); or
 - b. The addition of a health service facility or any other new institutional health service other than that allowed by G.S. 131E-176(16)b; and
 - c. The CON Section receives prior written notice of the planned expenditure along with documentation demonstrating that the provider meets the exemption.

The Project Involves The Redesign and Renovation Of Mission's Existing Main ER On Mission's Main Campus

The Project which is the subject of this Notice is projected to cost in excess of \$2,000,000.00. Please see Attachment 2, a Certified Projected Capital Cost Worksheet reflecting that the total project cost is anticipated to be \$12,724,000.00. Of that amount, \$8,764,000.00 will be expended on construction and renovation related to renovating the existing main ER at Mission Hospital. The remaining costs include: \$2,080,000.00 in medical equipment, \$520,000.00 in architect and engineering fees, \$150,000.00 in non-medical equipment, \$125,000.00 in furniture costs, \$195,000.00 in interest costs during construction and \$890,000.00 in ITS costs.

The Project qualifies for the statutory exemption at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g) because the sole purpose of the project and related expenditure is to renovate, relocate and replace a portion of an existing health service facility on the hospital's main campus. The project consists of redesigning and renovating Mission's main ER which is housed in the Mission Hospital main building, located on the hospital's main campus.

The term "campus" is defined at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(2c) as "the adjacent grounds and buildings, or grounds and buildings not separated by more than a public right-of-way, of a health service facility and related health care entities." For the purposes of the exemption at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g), "main campus" is defined as:

- a. The site of the main building from which a licensed health service facility provides clinical patient services and exercises financial and administrative control over the entire facility, including the buildings and grounds adjacent to that main building; and
- b. Other areas and structures that are not strictly contiguous to the main building but are located within 250 yards of the main building.

N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(14n).

The Mission main ER is located in the main hospital building on the main campus in Asheville, N.C. The Mission Hospital main building is the site from which the hospital exercises clinical and administrative control over the entire hospital. See Attachment 3 (Statement of Mission's COO).

Mission's Project Does Not Involve A Change In Bed Capacity

The Project does not involve a change in bed capacity as defined by N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(5). That section defines "change in bed capacity" in pertinent part as: (i) any relocation of health service facility beds from one licensed facility or campus to another, or (ii) any redistribution of health service facility bed capacity among the categories of health service facility beds defined in N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(9c), or (iii) any increase in the number of health service facility beds. The Project involves only the relocation and renovation of existing ER space on Mission's main campus and does not involve any relocation of health service facility beds from one licensed campus to another, any increase in the number of health service beds or any redistribution of health service facility beds among the categories identified at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(9c).

The Equipment To Be Acquired And Installed As Part Of The Project Does Not Constitute Major Medical Equipment Under The CON Statute

The CON Statute treats as a "new institutional health service" requiring a CON the acquisition of major medical equipment. N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(16)p. Major medical equipment is defined as "a single unit or single system of components with related functions which is used to provide medical and other health services and which costs more than two million dollars ("2,000,000)." N.C. Gen. Stat. 131E-176(14o).

Mission's Project does not involve the acquisition of medical equipment which meets the definition of "major medical equipment" under the CON Statute. The total equipment budget for the Project is approximately \$2,080,000.00. See Attachment 2 (capital cost worksheet). No single item or single system of components to be included in the Project comes anywhere close to the \$2,000,000.00.00 major medical equipment threshold in terms of cost. The Project does include the acquisition of an additional CT Scanner for the renovated ER. However, the total price of the new CT Scanner is estimated to be \$684,315.00. See Attachment 3 (Statement of Mission's COO).

Also, the Project does not include the acquisition of any of the major medical equipment designated at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-176(16)f1 which would require Mission to obtain a CON before acquiring the equipment.

Michaela Mitchell
Ena Lightbourne
December 9, 2022
Page 4

Conclusion

For the reasons recited herein, the Project qualifies under the exemption from CON Section review set forth at N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g). Please allow this letter to serve as the advance written notice required by N.C. Gen. Stat. § 131E-184(g). We would appreciate the CON Section acknowledging at its earliest opportunity that Mission's Project, as described herein, is not subject to CON Section Review and that Mission may proceed with the project without first obtaining a CON.

Please let me know if you have questions or need further information regarding this notice.

Very truly yours,



Kenneth L. Burgess
Shareholder

cc: Sondra Smith
Cathi Durham

Attachments

Attachment 1

Mission Emergency Department Redesign




Attachment 2

**Projected Capital Cost Form
Mission Hospital ER Redesign**

Building Purchase Price	\$0.00
Purchase Price of Land	\$0.00
Closing Costs	\$0.00
Site Preparation	\$0.00
Construction/Renovation Contract(s)	\$8,764,000.00
Landscaping	\$0.00
Architect / Engineering Fees	\$520,000.00
Medical Equipment	\$2,080,000.00
Non-Medical Equipment	\$150,000.00
Furniture	\$125,000.00
Consultant Fees (specify)	\$0.00
Financing Costs	\$0.00
Interest during Construction	\$195,000.00
Other (ITS)	\$890,000.00
Total Capital Cost	\$12,724,000.00

CERTIFICATION BY A LICENSED ARCHITECT OR ENGINEER

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the projected capital cost for the proposed project is complete and correct.




 Signature of Licensed Architect or Engineer

Date Signed: 12-5-2022

CERTIFICATION BY AN OFFICER OR AGENT FOR THE PROPONENT

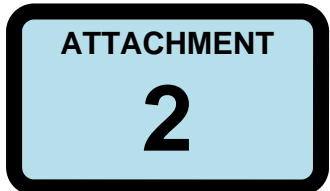
I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the projected total capital cost for the proposed project is complete and correct and that it is our intent to carry out the proposed project as described.



 Signature of Officer/Agent

Date Signed: 12/2/22

Name **EDDIE PUCKETT**
 Title of Officer/Agent **CONSTRUCTION MGR**



Attachment 3

Attachment 3

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH R. RUDISILL

1. I am the Chief Operating Officer for MH Mission Hospital, LLLP ("Mission"). I am personally familiar with Mission Hospital's plan to redesign and renovate Mission Hospital's emergency room located within the main campus of Mission Hospital. I make this statement in support of Mission's Exemption Notice to the N.C. Certificate of Need Section.

2. As part of my duties as Chief Operating Officer, I am responsible for the oversight of all operations of Mission Hospital, which includes the emergency department.

3. I am personally familiar with the proposed project which involves the renovation and redesign of the Mission emergency department.

4. I certify that the total costs of the project are approximately TWELVE MILLION, SEVEN HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FOUR THOUSAND DOLLARS (\$12,724,000.00).

5. The main building at Mission Hospital is the location from which Mission provides clinical and administrative control over the entire hospital.

6. Mission will acquire a third CT Scanner for the renovated emergency department at a cost of approximately SIX HUNDRED EIGHTY-FOUR THOUSAND, THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN DOLLARS (\$684,315.00), an amount well below the capital cost threshold of TWO MILLION DOLLARS (\$2,000,000.00) applicable to major medical equipment as that term is defined in the CON Statute.

7. As part of this project, Mission Hospital will not acquire any new major medical equipment, increase total bed capacity, increase total operating room capacity or develop any other new institutional health services described in N.C. Gen. Stat. §131E-176 (16).

This the 9 day of December, 2022.

Joseph R.
Rudisill

Digitally signed by
Joseph R. Rudisill
Date: 2022.12.09
14:53:11 -05'00'

JOSEPH R. RUDISILL
Chief Operating Officer
MH Mission Hospital, LLLP

From: [Mitchell, Micheala L](#)
To: [Stancil, Tiffany C](#)
Cc: [Lightbourne, Ena](#)
Subject: FW: [External] Notice of Exemption for Mission Hospital ER Renovation
Date: Saturday, December 10, 2022 9:09:18 AM
Attachments: [4889-8803-2067 v.1 Mission ER Redesign Exemption Notice w-attachments - 2022-12-09.pdf](#)

Tiffany, would you mind logging this as an exemption and assigning to Ena?

Thank you,

Micheala Mitchell, JD
(*she/her/hers*)
Section Chief, Healthcare Planning and CON Section
[NC Department of Health and Human Services](#)
[Division of Health Service Regulation](#)
809 Ruggles Drive, Edgerton Building
2704 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-2704
Office: 919 855 3879
Micheala.Mitchell@dhhs.nc.gov

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[Know the 3 Ws. Wear. Wait. Wash.](#)

#StayStrongNC and get the latest at nc.gov/covid19

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From: Burgess, Ken <kburgess@bakerdonelson.com>
Sent: Friday, December 9, 2022 4:37 PM
To: Mitchell, Micheala L <Micheala.Mitchell@dhhs.nc.gov>; Lightbourne, Ena <ena.lightbourne@dhhs.nc.gov>
Subject: [External] Notice of Exemption for Mission Hospital ER Renovation

CAUTION: External email. Do not click links or open attachments unless you verify. Send all suspicious email as an attachment to [Report Spam](#).

Micheala and Ena, again, Happy Friday. Attached please find a Notice of Exemption we are filing on behalf of MH Mission Hospital, LLLP in connection with Mission's renovation of its existing emergency department at the main hospital on the Mission Campus. Please let me know if you need additional information or have questions regarding the attached Exemption Notice. Thanks, Ken

Burgess

Kenneth (Ken) L. Burgess
Shareholder
Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC
2530 Meridian Parkway, Suite 300
Durham, NC 27713

Phone: 919-294-0802

Cell: 919-449-4754

Email address: kburgess@bakerdonelson.com

www.bakerdonelson.com

Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC represents clients across the U.S. and abroad from offices in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Washington, D.C.

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ATTACHMENT B

<https://wlos.com/news/local/josh-stein-transylvania-regional-hospital-hca-nc-attorney-general-monitoring-situation-after-doctors-leave-rural-mission-health-hospital>

NC attorney general monitoring situation after doctors leave rural Mission Health hospital

by Karen Zatkulak | Monday, May 10th 2021

TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY, N.C. (WLOS) — The North Carolina attorney general is responding to concerns raised in a recent News 13 investigation.

The City of Brevard sent a letter to AG Josh Stein's office after 14 doctors left Transylvania Regional Hospital.



CITY of BREVARD

The mission of the City of Brevard is to promote a high quality of life, support economic prosperity, and cultivate community while honoring its heritage and culture.

Office of the Mayor
(828) 885-5600

March 15, 2021

NC Department of Justice
Attn: Josh Stein, Attorney General
9001 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-9001

Ref. (A) City of Brevard Letter dated February 18, 2020

Dear Mr. Stein,

This letter is a follow on our letter of February 18th 2020 (ref a) expressing concerns about the state of medical care in Transylvania County resulting from the acquisition of the Transylvania Regional Hospital (TRH) by Hospital Corporation of America (HCA).

Over the past year we have worked with the Independent Monitor, Gibbons Advisors as well as the Dogwood Trust Compliance Division to ensure that our community continues to have access to the level and quality of medical care promised when HCA purchased TRH. We were assured when this sale was pending that our community would continue to receive the same local access to medical services that we had received before the sale. Recent events, however, have us extremely concerned about what is happening regarding health care in our rural community. Specifically:

- The majority of physicians/health care providers associated with Transylvania Regional Hospital have opted not to continue under contract with HCA
 - Exact numbers are difficult to provide because requests for numbers from TRH/HCA for number of health care providers who have departed, number remaining and targeted hiring numbers for replacements have not been made available to elected officials or the public.
 - We can verify that 15 health care providers in Transylvania County have recently left the HCA system: 8 primary care physicians, 1 family nurse practitioner, 2 OBGYNs, one orthopedic surgeon (out of 2 that were here in the county), one urologist (only full time urologist in the county), and all the general surgeons will have departed when the last one leaves HCA on March 30th.
- HCA has stated they are working to hire replacements but not at the same level that we have had in the past and they are unwilling to provide specific numbers.

95 West Main Street | Brevard, North Carolina 28712
www.cityofbrevard.com

In the letter, local elected officials demanded a state review of whether healthcare there has changed at the rural hospital since HCA Healthcare bought Mission Health.

The attorney general has now responded to the letter.

JOSH STEIN
ATTORNEY GENERAL



May 7, 2021

Mayor Jimmy Harris
95 West Main Street
Brevard, North Carolina 28712

Dear Mayor Harris:

Thank you for taking the time to write to my office. I appreciate your continued commitment to protecting health care for the people of Brevard and for taking the time to raise these concerns.

We are closely monitoring the concerns about changes to quality of care and charity care at HCA Healthcare facilities in western North Carolina, including reports of physicians leaving HCA due to contract concerns.

My office remains in continued contact with HCA, and we will raise these issues with them, as we've done with the independent monitor. As we continue these conversations, we will look to do everything in our power to protect health care in western North Carolina.

I remain committed to ensuring that HCA Healthcare complies with the agreement I negotiated during the Mission/HCA transaction. This agreement includes obligations to provide services. If HCA is repeatedly not making physicians available to provide those services, it is not meeting its commitments under the agreement. Further, as I mentioned in my previous letter, whenever we receive complaints about substandard quality of care, we not only review those in connection with HCA's duty to provide services, but we also share those complaints with our colleagues at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Llogan Walters from my office will reach out later this week to Brevard City Council Member Copelof and Human Resources Director Craig to request the additional information they have on this issue. Further, please continue to encourage residents of Brevard to write to my office if they are concerned about their experiences with HCA Healthcare – they can reach me via ncaqo@ncdoj.gov.

Again, thank you for your letter and for your continued commitment to the people of Brevard. Please continue to share your thoughts with me in the future. It is an honor to serve as your Attorney General.

Sincerely,

Josh Stein
Attorney General

www.ncdoj.gov

114 W. EDENTON STREET, RALEIGH, NC 27603
P. O. BOX 629, RALEIGH, NC 27602-0629

919.716.6400

It says, in part, "My office remains in continued contact with HCA, and we will raise these issues with them, as we've done with the Independent Monitor."

The letter goes on to say that the attorney general wants to make sure HCA complies with the purchase agreement.

"If HCA is repeatedly not making physicians available to provide those services, it is not meeting its commitments under the agreement."

In the letter, Stein also encouraged residents of Brevard to reach out to his office with any concerns.

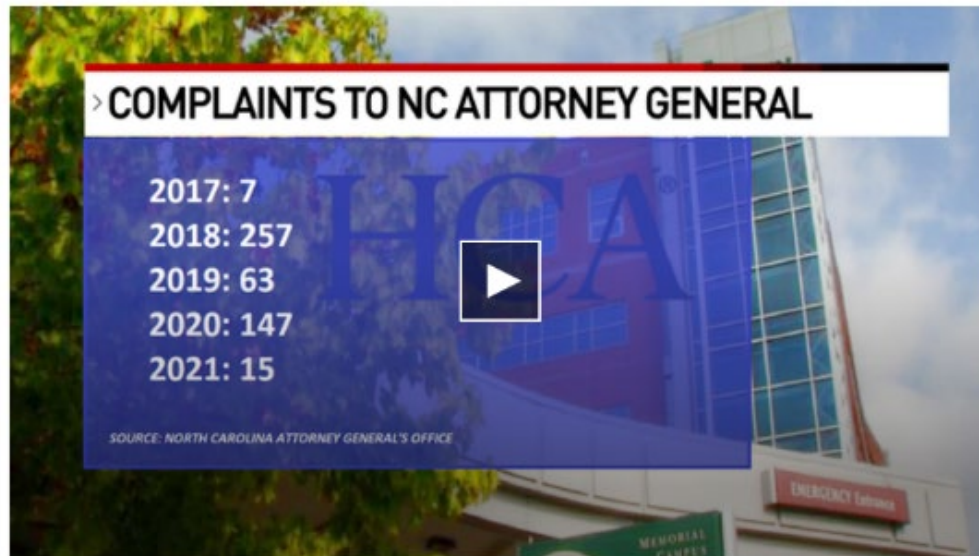
ATTACHMENT C

<https://wlos.com/news/local/josh-stein-hca-a-concerning-number-attorney-general-describes-recent-mission-health-complaints-filed>

'A concerning number,' Attorney General describes recent Mission Health complaints filed

by Karen Zatkulak | Tuesday, June 8th 2021

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (WLOS) — News 13 has learned that over a recent 12-month period, 116 people filed complaints to the North Carolina Attorney General's office about Mission Health.



"A concerning number," Attorney General describes recent Mission Health complaints filed

As we've reported, Attorney General Josh Stein approved the sale of Mission to HCA Healthcare back in 2019. That sale included certain agreements that HCA must keep in order to stay in compliance.

News 13 learned that while the number of concerns seem to be dropping, AG Stein is watching the situation very closely.

"Having to work harder with less."

When Geoff Noblitt found out his primary care office would be shut down last fall, he was furious.

"It just seemed cruel to come in and do that," Noblitt told News 13.

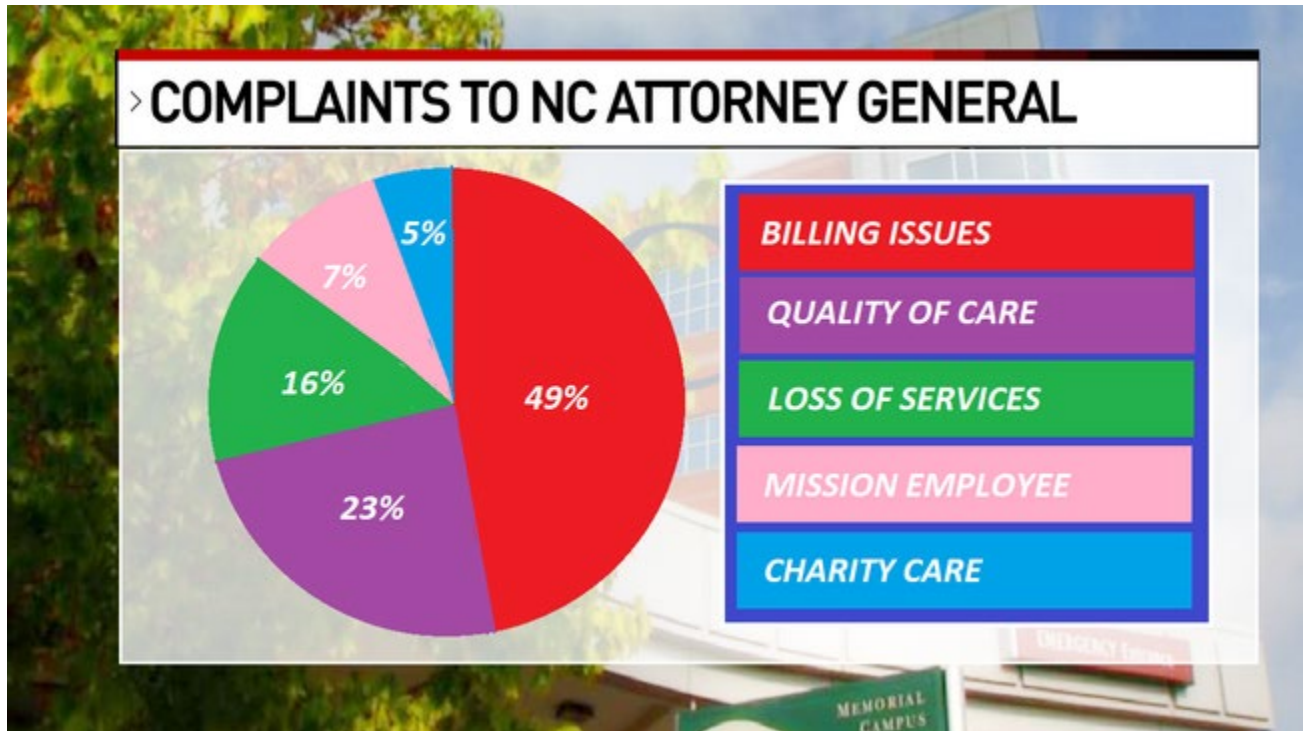
Noblitt said he was so upset he decided to write a letter to North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein.

"It doesn't seem right that this big, multi-billion dollar company comes in town with promises of bettering the community and they shut down your primary care, which is the most hands-on," he said. "That's the thing that helps people the most."

He's one of 116 people who reached out to Stein about Mission Health between April of 2020 and April of 2021.

We went through each complaint and learned that most were related to billing issues, another 23% were concerns over quality of care, 16% related to loss of services, 7% were from current or former employees of Mission Health, and 5% were over charity care.

NC ATTORNEY GENERAL MONITORING SITUATION AFTER DOCTORS LEAVE RURAL MISSION HEALTH HOSPITAL



News 13 broke down all 116 complaints to the state Attorney General in the past year concerning Mission Health. (Credit: NC Attorney General's Office/WLOS)

Some were handwritten and emotional while others included copies of disputed medical bills. But all had the same message -- dissatisfaction with HCA.

A former employee of Mission Health tells us she took the time to write a letter to AG Stein's office because she was both frustrated and sad about what she experienced.

She agreed to talk with us, but didn't want to be identified since she still has ties to the hospital.

Once HCA happened, it was a drastic change," the former employee said. "Really, I feel like all that we got was having to work harder with less.

She says she witnessed a drop in staff and services as both a medical worker there and a patient as well and believes patient care has suffered.

She told News 13 that when she realized she was no longer proud of where she worked, she made the tough decision to leave.

"When we say that patient care is number one and then we're cutting services that allow for us to provide better patient care, that just doesn't add up to me and I couldn't be a part of that," she said.

Other feedback

We checked for other feedback on how Mission Hospital is doing.

Yelp reviews gives Mission 2.5 out of 5 stars, and Mission's Leapfrog Healthgrade dropped to a "B" this spring.

In addition, we got the latest report from the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. The 26-page document goes through several areas in which the hospital was voluntarily reviewed, with a final decision of "Accreditation."

We also talked with Suzi Isreal who said her last trip to Mission was great.

I didn't ever feel not cared for" Isreal said. "Like there wasn't someone who would come and check on me.

Isreal is a cancer patient who went to the emergency room after a fall. She tells us she was surprised by the excellent care she received.

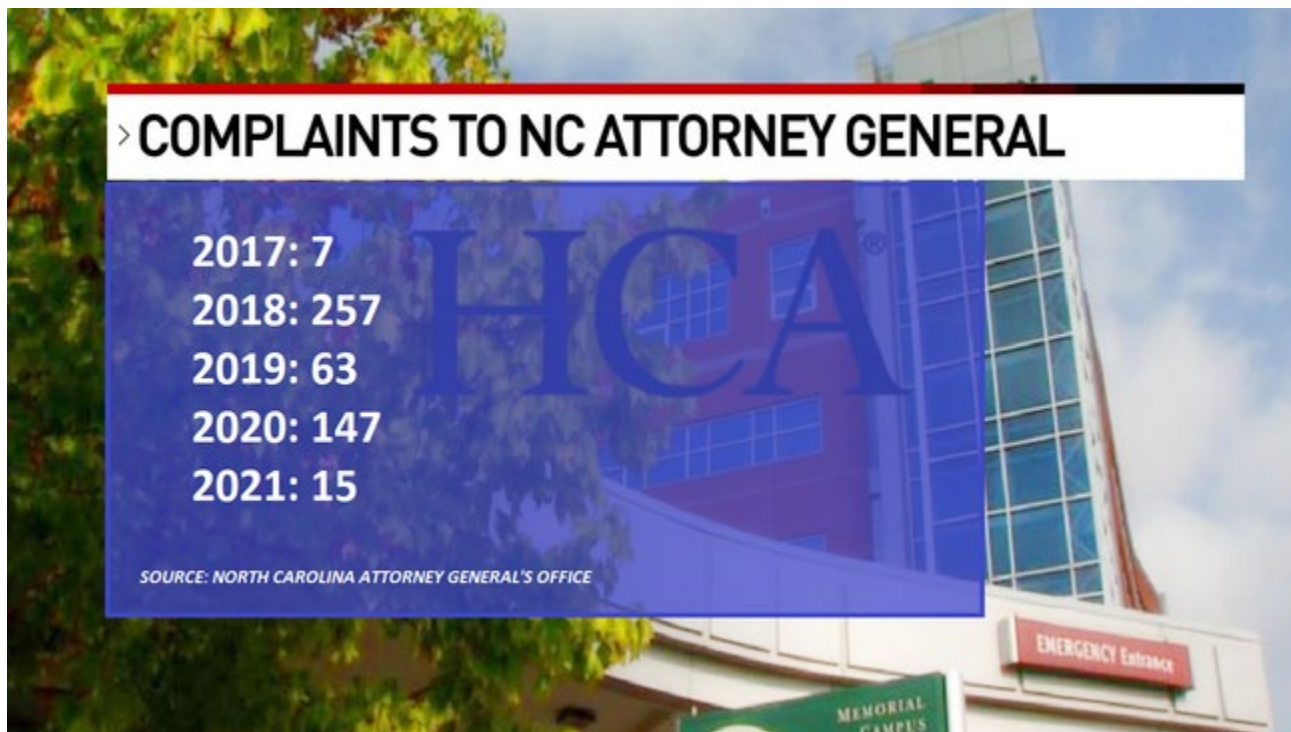
"I think the staff there, the nurses and medical staff are doing their very best with really extraordinary circumstances," Isreal said.

"We are going to be on top of this..."

We looked back at the number of complaints over the last five years.

In 2017, the attorney general received just seven concerns about Mission Health. The next year, Mission Health signed an agreement to be bought by HCA and 257 people wrote to AG Stein's office.

In 2019, when the HCA sale was official, there were 63 complaints. Last year there were 147, with 15 by April of 2021.



As we've previously reported, according to the Independent Monitor, Mission Health has always been in compliance with the promises made during the sale to HCA.

But, AG Stein tells us this is such an important issue that he recently dedicated one of his employees to keeping track of all the complaints about Mission Health.

"Whatever the issue is, we want to make sure Mission is complying with the commitments they made under the APA of a couple years ago, they're complying with the law, but also that they're doing the right thing by their patients," the attorney general said.

News 13 asked if 116 in one year was too many.

It's a concerning number, 116 over a year," Stein replied. "That's a lot, so we're sharing our serious concerns with the management of the health system and we are going to be on top of this to the extent we possibly can.

We also asked what power his office has since there are no clear metrics in the purchase agreement when it comes to things like staffing and levels of service.

"In the agreement HCA made, commitments about the services they would continue to offer and if they degrade the delivery of those services such that you can argue it's not meaningfully being provided then the agreement can be enforced against them," the attorney general responded. "So I think there are some teeth in the agreement."

Mission Health wouldn't do an interview, but a spokesperson did send us the following statement:

Since January of 2021, we are aware of 15 complaints made to the Attorney General's office, nine of which were related to billing and all of which have been resolved. We address every issue the Attorney

General's office brings to our attention promptly—both with them and the patient. Our patient care is our first priority. We strongly encourage everyone to contact us directly any time there is a concern so we can address it with them immediately and personally.

Going back to 2020, the majority of billing concerns were made shortly after acquisition of Mission and primarily regarded questions around changes to medical practice operations and a variety of billing issues all of which were resolved. Any patient or guarantor with billing questions or concerns should contact 833-323-0834 and we are happy to discuss, answer any questions you may have, and seek resolution where needed. Further, we have an email address, contactmission@hcahealthcare.com, where people can reach out to us on any matter.

ATTACHMENT D

NORTH CAROLINA

IN THE GENERAL COURT OF JUSTICE
SUPERIOR COURT DIVISION

BUNCOMBE COUNTY

No. 21CV 03276

2021 AUG 10 A 8 25

BUNCOMBE COUNTY CSC

WJA

WILLIAM ALAN DAVIS, RICHARD NASH,
WILL OVERFELT, Ed.S BCBA, JONATHAN
POWELL, FAITH C. COOK, Psy.D., and
KATHERINE BUTTON, on their own behalf
and on behalf of all others similarly situated,

Plaintiffs,

v.

HCA HEALTHCARE, INC., HCA
MANAGEMENT SERVICES, LP, HCA, INC.,
MH MASTER HOLDINGS, LLLP, MH
HOSPITAL MANAGER, LLC, MH MISSION
HOSPITAL, LLLP, ANC HEALTHCARE,
INC. *dba* MISSION HEALTH SYSTEM,
INC., and MISSION HOSPITAL, INC.,

Defendants.

CLASS ACTION COMPLAINT

Plaintiffs William Alan Davis, Richard Nash, Will Overfelt, Ed.S BCBA, Jonathan Powell, Faith C. Cook, Psy.D., and Katherine Button, individually, and on behalf of all others similarly situated, bring this action against Defendants HCA Healthcare, Inc. and its affiliates (collectively "HCA"), and Mission Health System, Inc. and its affiliate (collectively "Mission"), and state as follows:

I. NATURE OF THE ACTION

I. This is an action for restraint of trade and unlawful monopolization seeking class-wide damages and injunctive and equitable relief under the North Carolina Constitution (Art. 1, § 34), and North Carolina's antitrust and consumer protection statute (N.C.G.S. § 75-1 *et seq.*).

2. Article 1, Section 34 of the North Carolina Constitution states: “Perpetuities and monopolies are contrary to the genius of a free state and shall not be allowed.” However, from 1995 until 2019, Mission operated its hospital system as a monopoly. In January 2019, HCA acquired Mission and to this day continues to operate it as a for-profit monopoly.

3. The original monopoly was created in 1995, when Mission merged with its only significant competitor in the region, St. Joseph’s Hospital. As a result of that merger, Mission’s flagship Asheville hospital (“Mission Hospital-Asheville”) effectively became the only provider of inpatient general acute care (“GAC”) hospital services in Buncombe and Madison Counties. From 1995 until 2016, Mission was immunized from antitrust liability by a state statute under which it was issued a Certificate of Public Advantage (“COPA”). COPAs are a form of regulation in which a hospital is permitted to operate as a monopoly in exchange for subjecting itself to state oversight.

4. In 2016, after years of lobbying by Mission executives, the State repealed the COPA, leaving in place an unregulated monopoly. Once that repeal occurred, both Mission and any later purchasers of its assets, including HCA, lost any immunity from suit under the antitrust laws.

5. After the COPA was repealed, and prior to when HCA purchased the assets, Mission engaged in improper restraints on competition by enforcing unlawful terms and arrangements with private payers, including commercial health plans, and third-party administrators (“TPAs”) of self-insured plans. These improper restraints included tying, all-or-nothing arrangements, gag clauses, and, on information and belief, other anticompetitive terms and negotiating devices. Each of Mission’s anticompetitive acts, together and individually,

increased the prices of hospital services, insurance premiums, copays or deductibles paid by residents of Mission's overall 18-County Western North Carolina service area.

6. In 2019, Mission sold its assets to HCA, the world's largest for-profit hospital chain, and a company that has been subject to approximately 20 prior Federal Trade Commission ("FTC") antitrust proceedings. When HCA purchased Mission's assets effective January 2019, HCA did so precisely because of Mission's outsized ability to dictate prices and other contract terms to its customers.

7. Like Mission before it, HCA has used improper restraints in its agreements and arrangements with commercial health plans and TPAs, including tying, all-or-nothing arrangements, gag clauses, and on information and belief, other anticompetitive terms and negotiating devices. HCA has also refused to fully comply with a rule enacted by President Trump's Administration to increase transparency in healthcare pricing. Were HCA to comply and reveal to consumers and regulators the true prices that it charges, the public would know that HCA/Mission's prices for key services are by far the highest in North Carolina. For instance, according to a large commercial dataset, HCA currently charges *more than two times the State average for a C-Section without complications*. This price disparity—one matched and exceeded by numerous other procedures—can only exist because of the system's unbridled monopoly power and its status as a "must have" system in Western North Carolina. As a result, individual insurance premiums, which are primarily driven by healthcare costs, are significantly higher in Mission's service area than in surrounding counties and even North Carolina's largest cities.

8. At the same time, to maximize profits, HCA has been cutting costs and staff at an alarming rate, leaving Western North Carolinians with increasingly bad healthcare at an ever-growing price. It has also taken steps to drive business to its more expensive flagship facility in

Asheville, reducing access and increasing travel times for citizens in affected areas. As stated in a July 9, 2021, Executive Order by President Biden: “Hospital consolidation has left many areas, particularly rural communities, with inadequate or more expensive healthcare options.” HCA/Mission perfectly encapsulates this troubling trend and the harms consolidation inflicts on the population a hospital purports to serve.

9. Within the applicable damages period commencing on August 10, 2017, Defendants’ improper conduct has harmed consumers through higher health insurance premiums, copays, deductibles, and coinsurance payments. Consumers have also lost access to preferred physicians and healthcare providers and experienced worsening facility conditions and service.

10. Reduced quality and higher prices are the hallmark effects of an unregulated monopoly. Today, HCA holds *an approximate 90% market share* in the market for inpatient GAC hospital care in Buncombe County, the most populous county in Western North Carolina, and in nearby Madison County. Because insurers and consumers in the region have no choice but to use HCA, HCA has free rein to dictate the prices it charges insurers and consumers while at the same time undermining quality to cut costs.

11. In fact, in the Outlying Regions Inpatient Services-Only Market (defined below), HCA has monopoly (70%-plus)¹ market power across seven Counties: Yancey – 90.9% market share; Madison -- 90%; Buncombe -- 86.6%; Mitchell – 85.4%; Transylvania -- 78.7%; McDowell -- 76.4%; and Macon -- 74.7%.

12. HCA cannot deny the negative effects that unregulated hospital monopolies inflict on our Nation’s healthcare system. Indeed, in 2018—while it was negotiating its takeover of

¹ “Generally speaking, a 70% to 75% market share is necessary to sustain a monopolization claim.” *Sitelink Software, LLC v. Red Nova Labs, Inc.*, No. 14 CVS 9922, 2016 NCBC 43, 2016 NCBC LEXIS 45, *29 (N.C. Super. Ct., Wake County June 14, 2016).

Mission—HCA complained to an agency in Florida about a competitor’s “monopolistic dominance,” stating that “patients suffer from lack of access to care in their community,” they “have little to no healthcare provider choice,” and “[t]his type of monopolistic environment within the healthcare market stifles innovation and breeds a culture that negatively impacts the cost and quality of care.”

13. HCA’s behavior since taking over Mission, and Mission’s prior abuse of its monopoly power, exemplify why healthcare in the United States costs so much more than elsewhere.

14. Without this Court’s intervention, the future of healthcare in Western North Carolina—traditionally a destination for many, including retirees, in part because of its reputation for high-quality, low-cost healthcare—is at risk. Accordingly, Plaintiffs, who each have commercial or self-funded health coverage and have been and continue to be injured by Defendants’ practices, sue for class-wide damages and for equitable relief seeking to enjoin the continuation of Defendants’ unlawful abuse of their monopoly power.

II. PARTIES

A. Plaintiffs

15. Plaintiff **William Alan Davis** is a citizen of North Carolina who resides in Clyde, Haywood County. Mr. Davis is a participant in a private group healthcare plan and has had to pay higher amounts due to Defendants’ conduct.

16. Plaintiff **Richard Nash** is a citizen of North Carolina who resides in Candler, Buncombe County. Mr. Nash is a participant in a private group healthcare plan and has had to pay higher amounts due to Defendants’ conduct.

17. Plaintiff **Will Overfelt, Ed.S BCBA** is a citizen of North Carolina who resides in Asheville, Buncombe County. Mr. Overfelt holds an individual Affordable Care Act policy through Blue Cross and has had to pay higher amounts due to Defendants' conduct.

18. Plaintiff **Jonathan Powell** is a citizen of North Carolina who resides in Morganton, Burke County. Mr. Powell holds group health insurance with Blue Cross through his place of employment and has had to pay higher amounts due to Defendants' conduct.

19. Plaintiff **Faith C. Cook, Psy.D.** is a citizen of North Carolina who resides in Asheville, Buncombe County. Dr. Cook holds group health insurance with Blue Cross through an Affordable Care Act plan and has had to pay higher amounts due to Defendants' conduct.

20. Plaintiff **Katherine Button** is a citizen of North Carolina who resides in Asheville, Buncombe County. Ms. Button is a member of a self-funded health insurance plan, and has had to pay higher amounts due to Defendants' conduct.

B. Defendants

21. Defendant **HCA Healthcare, Inc.** is a Delaware corporation with a principal place of business in Nashville, Tennessee. It may be served with process through its principal office address of One Park Plaza, Nashville TN 37203, or through its registered agent, The Corporation Trust Company, at Corporation Trust Center, 1209 Orange Street, Wilmington, Delaware 19801.

22. HCA Healthcare, Inc. is the ultimate parent company of the HCA enterprise and was directly and materially involved through its officers and directors in making the pertinent decisions and undertaking the pertinent actions herein. It is publicly held and listed with the Securities and Exchange Commission ("SEC"). HCA Healthcare, Inc. or its predecessors in interest have been named as respondents in prior antitrust proceedings brought by the FTC and/or

the U.S. Department of Justice (“DOJ”), including with regard to hospital acquisitions and divestments of improper mergers.

23. HCA is the world’s largest for-profit hospital chain. It owns and operates over 180 hospitals in 21 states. HCA’s revenues were over \$51 billion for 2020.² Its net income was over \$3.7 billion in 2020.

24. Defendant **HCA Management Services, LP** is a Delaware limited partnership with its principal place of business in Nashville, Tennessee. It may be served with process through its principal office address of One Park Plaza, Nashville TN 37203, or through its North Carolina registered agent, CT Corporation System, 160 Mine Lake Court Suite 200, Raleigh, NC 27601.

25. HCA Management Services, LP was formed in 1999. It applied for a certificate of authority to do business in North Carolina on December 28, 2005. It is currently registered to do business in North Carolina. It is listed on the HCA Healthcare website³ as being the entity responsible for that website.

26. HCA Management Services, LP entered into a confidentiality and nondisclosure agreement with Defendant ANC Healthcare, Inc. f/k/a Mission Health System, Inc. in or about July 11, 2017. At that time, MH Master Holdings, LLLP which was only first organized on August 23, 2018 did not yet exist. Pursuant to negotiations conducted under that nondisclosure agreement, various Mission and HCA entities entered into an Asset Purchase Agreement (“APA”) dated August 2018, and an amended Asset Purchase Agreement (“Amended APA”) dated January 2019, facilitating the asset sale of relevant Mission system assets to HCA.

² By comparison, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers , North Carolina’s total expenditures in fiscal year (FY) 2020 were \$60.2 billion, including general funds, other state funds, bonds, and federal funds. HCA Healthcare is at number 62 on the Fortune 500.

³ <https://hcahealthcare.com>.

27. Defendant **HCA, Inc.** is a Delaware corporation with its principal place of business in Nashville, Tennessee. It may be served with process through its principal office address of One Park Plaza, Nashville TN 37203.

28. HCA, Inc. is the plan sponsor of a defined contribution plan established January 1, 1983, which provides retirement benefits for all eligible employees of HCA, Inc. or its affiliates. It is the sponsor of the HCA 401(k) Plan, with employer identification number 75-2497104, and a total number of participants of 387,421 as of 2019. On information and belief, HCA, Inc. is the plan sponsor of a retirement benefit plan for numerous employees associated with the North Carolina Division of HCA Healthcare, Inc. It has been a party to prior proceedings challenging various aspects of HCA's business practices. *E.g.*, US DOJ press release dated June 26, 2003.

29. Defendant **MH Master Holdings, LLLP** is a Delaware limited liability limited partnership. HCA has stated in press releases that "Mission Health, an operating division of HCA Healthcare, is based in Asheville, North Carolina, and is the state's sixth largest health system." On information and belief, the "Mission Health" entity to which HCA refers as being "based in Asheville" is MH Master Holdings, LLLP. Accordingly, MH Master Holdings, LLLP has a principal place of business in Asheville, North Carolina. It may be served with process at its registered office address, c/o CT Corporation System, 160 Mine Lake Ct Ste 200, Raleigh, NC 27615, or, at its principal office at 509 Biltmore Avenue, Asheville, NC 28801, or, c/o HCA Healthcare, Inc., One Park Plaza, Nashville, TN 37203.

30. MH Master Holdings, LLLP is listed as the buyer in the asset sale documented by the APA and Amended APA. It purchased the Mission system assets via the Amended APA and is the current owner of the former Mission system assets.

31. MH Master Holdings, LLLP applied for a certificate of authority to do business in North Carolina on August 23, 2018. It filed its most recent annual report with the North Carolina Secretary of State, Department of Corporations (“NC SOS”), on or about April 6, 2021, describing itself as being engaged in the “healthcare related business.”

32. MH Master Holdings, LLLP’s general partner is MH Hospital Manager LLC. MH Master Holdings, LLLP is a 99% limited partner in MH Mission Hospital, LLLP. Under the Amended APA, MH Master Holdings, LLLP is authorized to do business under brand names including “Mission Health,” “Mission Health System” and the “HCA” brand.

33. The “corporate bio” used at the end of many HCA NC press releases, opens, under the header “ABOUT MISSION HEALTH,” by stating that “Mission Health [is] an operating division of HCA Healthcare [and] is based in Asheville, North Carolina....”

34. On information and belief, MH Master Holdings, LLLP identifies itself as and holds itself out as being a part of the North Carolina Division of HCA Healthcare, Inc. See, e.g., job postings on websites like “Health Careers,” listing open positions at “HCA Healthcare -- North Carolina Division.”

35. HCA states in public website content that its “North Carolina Division,” also known as, “Mission Health,” is “based in Asheville, North Carolina.”

36. Per HCA press releases, since February 2019, Greg Lowe has been “president of the newly created Asheville-based North Carolina Division, which comprises the recently purchased Mission Health system of six hospitals in western North Carolina.” Upon information and belief, Mr. Lowe resides in North Carolina.

37. Defendant, **MH Hospital Manager, LLC**, is a Delaware limited liability company with a principal place of business in Tennessee or North Carolina. It may be served with process

through its registered agent, c/o CT Corporation System, 160 Mine Lake Court Suite 200, Raleigh NC 27615, or, at its office at 509 Biltmore Avenue, Asheville, NC 28801, or c/o HCA Healthcare, One Park Plaza, Nashville, TN 37203.

38. MH Hospital Manager, LLC applied for a certificate of authority to do business in North Carolina on August 22, 2018. Its annual report dated April 6, 2021, describes the nature of its business as “healthcare related business.”

39. MH Hospital Manager uses the assumed business name, “North Carolina Division,” pursuant to an assumed name certificate dated April 22, 2019, filed with the Buncombe County Register of Deeds. It described the counties where the assumed business name will be used to engage in business as “All 100 North Carolina counties.”

40. Defendant, **MH Mission Hospital, LLLP** is a Delaware limited liability limited partnership. According to Defendants, it is “located in Asheville, North Carolina” and has a principal place of business in North Carolina. It may be served with process at its registered office address, c/o CT Corporation System, 160 Mine Lake Ct Ste 200, Raleigh, NC 27615, or, at its principal office at 509 Biltmore Avenue, Asheville NC 28801, or c/o HCA Healthcare, One Park Plaza, Nashville, TN 37203.

41. Effective July 2019, Chad Patrick became the Chief Executive Officer of what HCA describes as “HCA Healthcare’s North Carolina Division’s flagship 763-bed Mission Hospital” and resided in Asheville since Summer 2019. On information and belief, the HCA corporate entity employing Mr. Patrick is MH Mission Hospital, LLLP.

42. Defendant **ANC Healthcare, Inc. f/k/a Mission Health System, Inc.** is a North Carolina nonprofit corporation which had its principal place of business in Asheville, North Carolina through 2019. It remains an active corporation incorporated under North Carolina law.

In or about February 2019, its principal office was moved to Florida. It may be served with process through its registered agent, c/o Corporation Service Company, 2626 Glenwood Avenue Suite 550, Raleigh NC 27608, or at its current office address of 425 West New England Avenue Suite 300, Winter Park, FL 32789.

43. ANC Healthcare, Inc. f/k/a Mission Health System, Inc. was incorporated in 1981 as a North Carolina nonprofit corporation. As of the date of the filing of this lawsuit, it remains a nonprofit corporation incorporated under North Carolina law. See Articles of Restatement for Nonprofit Corporation filed February 1, 2019. The corporation is not defunct nor has it been dissolved and in its most recent Articles of Restatement it describes its duration as “unlimited.”

44. As of 2015, it described itself as an “integrated healthcare system” which provided “medical care, hospital care” and “the delivery of health care services to persons resident in Western North Carolina and surrounding areas.”

45. During the time period commencing in or about 2010 and continuing through and including January 2019, Ronald Paulus (“Paulus”) was the President and Chief Executive Officer of ANC Healthcare, Inc. f/k/a Mission Health System, Inc.

46. Defendant **Mission Hospital, Inc.** is a North Carolina nonprofit corporation which had its principal place of business in Asheville, North Carolina through 2019. It remains an active corporation incorporated under North Carolina law. In or about February 2019, its principal office was moved to Florida. It may be served with process through its registered agent, c/o Corporation Service Company, 2626 Glenwood Avenue Suite 550, Raleigh NC 27608, or at its current office address of 425 West New England Avenue Suite 300, Winter Park, FL 32789.

47. Defendant Mission Hospital, Inc. was incorporated in 1951 as a North Carolina nonprofit corporation. As of the date of the filing of this lawsuit, it remains a nonprofit corporation

incorporated under North Carolina law. See Articles of Restatement for Nonprofit Corporation filed February 1, 2019. The corporation is not defunct nor has it been dissolved and in its most recent Articles of Restatement it describes its duration as “unlimited.”

48. Defendants ANC Healthcare, Inc. f/k/a Mission Health System, Inc. and Mission Hospital, Inc. are each identified as sellers under the Amended APA. *See* Amended APA, p. 1. Under the Amended APA’s terms, ANC Healthcare, Inc. f/k/a Mission Health System, Inc. and Mission Hospital, Inc. remain liable for pre-asset sale ownership or operations of the hospital business. *See* Amended APA, § 2.4 (in which the HCA entities who function as the buyers under the Amended APA purported to exclude from their liability “any Liabilities related to the ownership or operation of the Business or the Purchased Assets prior to the Effective Time”).

49. Under the Amended APA, the sellers represented and warranted that they “have operated, and are operating, the Business... and their properties in compliance in all material respects with all applicable Laws,” up through the sale date. Amended APA, § 4.11(a)(i). In fact, they did not comply with the laws, as alleged herein.

III. JURISDICTION AND VENUE

50. The Court has subject matter jurisdiction over Plaintiffs’ claims under N.C. Const. Art. 1, § 34 and N.C.G.S. § 75-1 *et seq.*

51. The Court has personal jurisdiction over Defendants because they are domiciled in the State or they have transacted business in the State relevant to this antitrust action.

52. Venue is proper in this Court because a substantial part of the events giving rise to Plaintiffs’ claims occurred in Buncombe County.

53. The case falls under the local controversy exception to federal jurisdiction under the Class Action Fairness Act. 28 U.S.C. § 1332(d)(4)(A)⁴ and (B).⁵

54. The case is properly designated a mandatory complex business case. Under N.C.G.S. § 7A-45.4(a)(3), the case involves disputes under antitrust law, including disputes arising under Chapter 75 of the General Statutes that do not arise solely under G.S. 75-1.1 or Article 2 of Chapter 75 of the General Statutes. Under N.C.G.S. § 7A-45.4(b)(2), the amount in controversy computed in accordance with G.S. 7A-243 is at least five million dollars (\$5,000,000) when the claims of the putative class are taken into account.

55. Under the Amended APA, a choice of forum provision specifies the Business Court. Amended APA § 13.2, entitled, Choice of Law and Forum. While Plaintiffs are nonparties to the Amended APA, the Business Court remains the appropriate venue for the instant matter.

56. All Defendants during the pertinent times have participated in significant interstate commerce and the relevant hospital operations have affected interstate commerce.

⁴ “A [federal] district court shall decline to exercise jurisdiction ... (A) (i) over a class action in which— (I) greater than two-thirds of the members of all proposed plaintiff classes in the aggregate are citizens of the State in which the action was originally filed; (II) at least 1 defendant is a defendant— (aa) from whom significant relief is sought by members of the plaintiff class; (bb) whose alleged conduct forms a significant basis for the claims asserted by the proposed plaintiff class; and (cc) who is a citizen of the State in which the action was originally filed; and (III) principal injuries resulting from the alleged conduct or any related conduct of each defendant were incurred in the State in which the action was originally filed; and (ii) during the 3-year period preceding the filing of that class action, no other class action has been filed asserting the same or similar factual allegations against any of the defendants on behalf of the same or other persons....” 28 U.S.C. § 1332(d)(4)(A).

⁵ A “district court shall decline to exercise jurisdiction” [where] “two-thirds or more of the members of all proposed plaintiff classes in the aggregate, and the primary defendants, are citizens of the State in which the action was originally filed.” 28 U.S.C. § 1332(d)(4)(B).

IV. RELEVANT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. Mission acquires monopoly power under the COPA

57. Mission Hospital was originally formed over a century ago as a local Asheville charitable institution. When founded in the 1880s, the Dogwood Mission, also known as the Flower Mission, provided charity care to Asheville's sick and poor.

58. After World War II, Mission Hospital joined with other Buncombe County hospitals to become a major medical center in western North Carolina. In 1951, Mission Hospital was incorporated as a nonprofit. Although it was a nonprofit, it was not under the patronage or the control of the State nor was it a local health authority.

59. As of the early 1990s, the two private acute care hospitals in Asheville were Mission Hospital-Asheville and St. Joseph's Hospital. Mission had 381 beds. St. Joseph's Hospital had 285 beds. The two hospitals sought to partner and lobbied the General Assembly to enact an initial version of the COPA law to facilitate a partnership in 1993.⁶

60. The hospitals claimed that their plans did not call for a merger and that each hospital would maintain its corporate identity, governance structure and assets. Nonetheless, in 1994 the FTC opened an antitrust investigation out of a concern that the combination of St. Joseph's and Mission would result in a single large hospital dominating upwards of 80% or 90% of the market, an undeniable monopoly under the concentration metric the FTC uses.

61. In response, the hospitals lobbied the North Carolina General Assembly to amend the COPA⁷ to further immunize them from antitrust scrutiny. The General Assembly did so in December 1995. Mission and St. Joseph's then entered into their partnership.

⁶ Hospital Cooperation Act of 1993, Session Law 1993-529.

⁷ See N.C.G.S. §§ 131E-192.1 through 131E-192.13 (repealed).

62. Subsequently, in 1998, Mission determined that it desired to buy St. Joseph's, acquire all of its assets, and combine operations under one license as Mission Health System. The COPA was amended in October 1998 to facilitate the merger which then occurred.

63. The COPA statute contemplated that Mission would "limit health care costs" and "control prices of health care services."⁸ Effectively, the government and Mission had a deal: If Mission accepted regulation to prevent it from charging monopoly prices or otherwise abusing its monopoly market power, North Carolina would exempt Mission from the antitrust laws.

64. The COPA law acknowledged that the same conduct that may be lawful under the COPA may be unlawful without it, noting that "federal and State antitrust laws may prohibit or discourage" the "cooperative arrangements" that the COPA allowed.⁹

65. When the COPA was amended in 1998 to allow the Mission-St. Joseph's merger, the State accepted the hospitals' representations that the merger "will not likely have an adverse effect on costs or prices of health care."¹⁰

66. The 1998 amended COPA documented the dominant market share of the merged Mission institution: "The two Hospitals dominate the market share in two counties. 91% of Madison County admissions and 87% of Buncombe County admissions are either Memorial Mission or St. Joseph's Hospital. Memorial Mission and St. Joseph's are located in Buncombe County. Madison County, which has no hospital, is closer to the two Asheville hospitals than to any other acute care hospital."¹¹

⁸ See former N.C.G.S. §§ 90-21.24, 90-21.28 (enacted by Physician Cooperation Act of 1995, SL 1995-395 (1995)); recodified at N.C.G.S. §§ 131E-192.1 through 131E-192.13 (repealed by Session Laws 2015-288, s. 4, as amended by Session Laws 2016-94, s. 12G.4(a), effective Sept. 30, 2016).

⁹ See former N.C.G.S. §§ 90-21.24(5).

¹⁰ 1998 COPA, p. 13. See also *id.* at p. 14 (reciting that merger will "not likely have an adverse impact on ... price of health care services").

¹¹ *Id.*, pp. 7-8.

67. A second amended COPA dated June 2005 stated: “Mission Health dominates the market share in two counties. 93.8% of Madison County admissions and 90.6% of Buncombe County admissions are at Mission Hospitals’ facilities, which are located in Buncombe County. Madison County, which has no hospital, is closer to Mission Hospitals in Asheville than to any other acute care hospital.”

68. In 2011, a hospital protesting Mission’s anticompetitive practices publicized comments by Mission’s Communications Director at a conference in which the Director said, “There was a lot of talk about the fact that we are a monopoly, and we are.... We’re kinda the 500-pound gorilla in Western North Carolina.” The Director was subsequently terminated.

69. As of 2016, Mission continued to have a 93% market share in its primary service area—Buncombe and Madison Counties—for inpatient GAC hospital services. Under modern antitrust law, generally a market share of over 60% constitutes a monopoly. And HCA itself has described a competitor’s 85% inpatient market share as a monopoly in another state.

B. Mission engages in anticompetitive conduct under the COPA

70. While the COPA was in effect, it had provisions that sought to limit the ability of Mission to charge supracompetitive monopoly prices for healthcare or otherwise engage in anticompetitive behavior.

71. However, Mission evaded the COPA’s substantive restrictions, to the detriment of competition and consumer welfare. Between 1995 and 2016, Mission engaged in anticompetitive conduct by using its monopoly income from Mission Hospital-Asheville to pressure smaller hospitals in the counties surrounding Buncombe and Madison Counties to allow Mission to manage or acquire their businesses. Each time Mission managed to acquire one of the smaller hospitals in the counties surrounding its Buncombe and Madison County primary service area, this

eliminated a potential competitor and expanded the scope of Mission's dominance. Between 1995 and 2016-17, Mission successfully acquired five of the hospitals in those counties.

72. During the same period, Mission acquired and associated with many physician groups and eliminated many of them.

73. From time to time, Mission executives admitted that the purpose of these acquisitions was to reduce competition in those regions. For example, in 2004, when Mission acquired McDowell Hospital, CEO Bob Burgin was quoted as saying that the acquisition would "prevent another provider from entering a local market."

74. In 2004, a group of four large employers in Western North Carolina issued a report on rising medical prices, which noted that Mission refused to cooperate and threatened to sue. The employers expressed their concern that the COPA was "allowing Mission to negotiate reimbursement rates that are higher than in other major counties...." Mission denied that any of this was occurring.

75. In 2011-12, with the COPA coming up for renewal, physicians and other hospitals publicly protested Mission's business practices. One physician described "Mission's abuse of the COPA," which was "a law that was enacted at their request to protect the citizens of [Western North Carolina] from monopolies and high medical prices." He described that by using its Asheville monopoly to charge "higher payments from insurers," Mission was able to "build an unprecedented empire," buying so many practices and other hospitals that competitors, including "those of us in private practice will not be able to survive." This physician described that when he met with Mission executives to try to protect his practice, Mission's response was that they would "crush us."

76. During this period, Mission was publicly claiming that its costs and prices were low. In fact, its prices were high, but they were concealed from regulators and the public due to Mission's use of gag clauses with commercial health plans.

77. A 2011 report by economist Greg Vistnes ("Vistnes Report") commissioned to study the efficacy of the COPA confirmed that a potential for regulatory evasion existed and that "[t]he incentive problems associated with the COPA regulation appear to be consistent with MHS' [Mission Hospital System] observed conduct and complaints about MHS' conduct that have been voiced by certain parties." The report found in part that the COPA created an incentive for Mission to acquire facilities outside of Asheville, because while the COPA limited Mission's ability to raise costs and margins, the cost increase cap was tied *only* to Mission Hospital-Asheville—meaning that if Mission increased costs by acquiring outlying facilities it could raise prices without technically violating the COPA's margin cap. Evidence presented at an FTC workshop in 2019 indicated that this was in fact what Mission appeared to have done.

C. The COPA is repealed in 2016

78. In 2010, Paulus became the new President and CEO of Mission. Paulus almost immediately began an effort to reduce or lift the COPA restrictions while retaining its immunity protection.

79. Paulus claimed that the Mission system could not survive unless the COPA restraints were repealed. These representations were false.

80. In a 2012 video, Paulus criticized the anticompetitive effect of "much larger out-of-area health systems that have entered our region." Paulus claimed that the COPA prevented Mission from competing with these predatory for-profit out-of-state multi-market systems.

81. After years of pressure by Paulus and other Mission executives, the Legislature obliged and passed a bill that repealed the COPA, terminating state oversight effective September 30, 2016.

82. While Mission prices had risen under the COPA, after its repeal they grew even more substantially, as described below.

83. On information and belief, within a year of the COPA's repeal, Mission executives had begun meeting with HCA about selling the system to HCA, an out-of-state system. Upon information and belief, Paulus anticipated the sale to a for-profit chain at the time he lobbied to repeal the statute. However, he did not inform Legislators about that fact.

D. Mission assets are sold to HCA

84. By 2017, Mission's executives had entered secret negotiations to sell assets from the Mission system to HCA, a multi-state health system that has been subject to at least 20 antitrust proceedings brought by the FTC. The negotiation process was conducted without any public notice or input, despite both companies' purported commitment to transparency and Mission's status as a charitable nonprofit with a fiduciary duty to the citizens of Western North Carolina. Non-executive doctors and staff were excluded from the negotiation process and the decision to sell to HCA.

85. Upon information and belief, there were inadequate efforts made to solicit other bidders and any other bids submitted were not taken seriously, resulting in an undervaluation of Mission.

86. Mission and HCA announced the deal on March 21, 2018. It was followed by execution of the 2018 APA on August 30, 2018, and the Amended APA in January 2019. The

purchase price was approximately \$1.5 billion. Mission's annual income was estimated to be in the same range, at approximately \$1.75 billion, reflecting the undervalued nature of the deal.

87. From approximately 2017 through January 2019, HCA and Mission negotiated the terms of the asset purchase which would form the new North Carolina Division of HCA Healthcare. On information and belief, HCA was interested in the transaction primarily because of the built-in monopoly power Mission had as a result of the COPA.

88. The HCA takeover was hugely beneficial to Mission's executives. In his last four months as CEO of Mission—which, at that point, was still technically a nonprofit—Paulus was paid \$4 million in compensation from Mission's 501(c)(3) arm (i.e., its charity). He also secured a contract for himself as a consultant with HCA, under terms that have been kept secret and has, on information and belief, secured other lucrative business related to HCA that is ongoing.

E. HCA engages in post-acquisition conduct that adversely affects physicians, staff, consumers, and the community

89. Defendants' monopolistic practices have caused reduced quality of service in HCA/Mission hospitals. After the sale to HCA, there have been numerous news reports, public protests, over 100 citizen complaints sent into the Attorney General, and statements from area politicians protesting declining quality at the system.

90. Because the asset sale involved the sale of a nonprofit to a for-profit business, it was necessary for Defendants to obtain regulatory approval from the North Carolina Attorney General.

91. Between August 2018 and January 2019, the Attorney General required Mission and HCA to include certain provisions in the Amended APA to secure his approval. Under these provisions, Defendants promised to uphold certain commitments set forth in the Amended APA.

The Amended APA affords the Attorney General the authority to enforce the commitments in the Business Court.

92. The scope of the Amended APA commitments is narrow and is not coextensive with this lawsuit. The Amended APA agreement with the negotiated HCA commitments did not cover quality of care or pricing. However, some of the commitments do cover relevant ground and have been the subject of multiple public complaints:

- HCA promised that until January 2029 it would maintain the same level of charity care coverage for poor patients as before. However, HCA has a) reduced coverage for non-emergency services, b) implemented a threshold such that out-of-pocket expenses must exceed \$1,500 to qualify for charity care coverage, and c) ended pre-approval for charity care coverage such that patients are forced to risk taking on substantial debt or forgo needed care.
- Section 7.13(a) and Schedule 7.13(a) require HCA to provide until January 2029 numerous defined services at Mission Hospital-Asheville. However, patients and staff have publicly noted that HCA has reduced budgets and staffing, making it more difficult for medical staff to provide the same quality of service as before.
- Section 7.13(b) and Schedule 7.13(b) required HCA to provide until January 2029 numerous services at its five smaller regional hospitals. HCA has cut budgets, staffing and quality there too. Nurses were so outspoken about their concerns that they voted to unionize, a drastic and effectively unprecedented step.
- Under Section 7.13(j), Defendants asserted they had “no present intent to discontinue any of the community activities, programs or services provided” prior to the buyout. Less than a year later in October 2019, however, HCA closed outpatient rehabilitation clinics in Candler and Asheville. In 2020, it closed primary care practices in Candler and Biltmore Park, and ended chemotherapy services at Mission Medical Oncology locations in Franklin, Brevard, Marion, and Spruce Pine.

93. These cutbacks and profit-driven decisions drew criticism from regulators. Among other things, the Attorney General wrote in February 2020 that the Defendants’ “decision to focus on emergent care appears inconsistent with the Asset Purchase Agreement” and that the Defendants’ website incorrectly claimed its charity care policy covered “non-elective” services. The Attorney General’s office also said they had received a “surge” of complaints after the HCA

sale, including “harrowing” complaints about quality of care and staffing cuts. Other officials, such as the Mayor of Asheville and Buncombe County officials, also publicly expressed “deep concern” about HCA’s dramatic cuts and the pressure put on doctors and nurses. Doctors, nurses, and patients have also called the situation created by HCA’s cost cutting “dangerous,” and have noted that HCA’s policies force doctors and nurses to see more patients to maximize profit at the expense of patient care.

94. After the HCA purchase, leading national agencies that assess quality of care factors such as safety, accidents, injuries, infections, and readmissions lowered their ratings for the hospital system. The Leapfrog Group, an independent agency, downgraded Mission Hospital-Asheville to a “B” from an “A.” According to Leapfrog, the hospital fell short in various measures, including infections, high-risk baby deliveries, some cancer treatment procedures, and the patient experience regarding elective surgeries.

95. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (“CMS”) also downgraded Mission. CMS uses surveys of patients’ experiences, including how responsive hospital staff were to their needs and the cleanliness of the hospital environment. In 2020, CMS even threatened to terminate its contract with HCA/Mission over patient safety concerns, a rare and particularly serious step given Mission’s large share of Medicare and Medicaid patients.

96. The Mission Health System HCA now controls has quickly gone from one of the most respected hospitals in the Nation and a “crown jewel” of North Carolina’s healthcare system to a facility known for declining, dangerous conditions. Amid the decline, HCA’s profits are at an all-time high, driven by the new addition of Mission Hospital-Asheville as the HCA chain’s second highest revenue hospital out of all 100-plus ones in the chain.

V. HOSPITAL/INSURANCE MARKETS AND EFFECTS OF CONSOLIDATION

A. Hospital/insurance negotiations in a competitive market.

97. The market for hospital services is different from other product/services markets because the person consuming the hospital services (the patient) does not negotiate—and in many cases, does not even know beforehand—the costs of the services they are consuming.

98. Instead, commercial health plans, such as Blue Cross and Aetna, purchase medical services for the benefit of their insured members, the consumers. Commercial health plans negotiate with hospitals for the price the plans will pay for medical services, known as the “allowed amount,” before services are consumed by members.

99. Commercial health plans generally do not negotiate with hospitals on a service-by-service basis; rather, commercial health plans negotiate with hospitals for bundles of services that the health plan will offer to members as “in-network” benefits. If the commercial health plan and hospital reach a deal for a bundle of services (for instance, all acute inpatient hospital services), the hospital will be considered in-network for every service in that bundle. This means that for any service in that bundle, if a commercial health plan’s member receives that service from the hospital, the commercial health plan will pay the hospital the allowed amount those two parties negotiated for that service.

100. In competitive markets—markets with multiple hospitals—commercial health plans will enter into a contract with a hospital for a bundle of services when the hospital offers competitively priced and sufficiently high-quality services. In competitive markets, commercial health plans may choose to include as in-network some bundles of services at a hospital but not others; for instance, the commercial health plan may choose to have one hospital be in-network for all acute inpatient hospital services, but the plan may choose not to include that hospital in-

network for some acute outpatient hospital services (visits not requiring an overnight stay) because the plan could purchase higher quality versions of those outpatient services from a nearby competing hospital or other outpatient provider at a lower price. Similarly, in a competitive market, a commercial health plan may decline to purchase any services from a hospital if that hospital's price or quality of care are not competitive with other nearby providers.

101. If a commercial health plan wishes to be a viable product that consumers wish to purchase for themselves (or employers wish to purchase for their employees), the plan must include a comprehensive bundle of services that members can access in their region. A commercial health plan that does not offer in-network services that individuals commonly desire or that individuals may need in the case of unforeseen health problems will not be a viable insurance plan. Similarly, if a commercial health plan only offers certain services (such as acute inpatient hospital services) in-network at a hospital that is a long distance from many individuals' residences, that plan will not be viable, because individuals may not be able or willing to travel so far to receive those services.

102. The costs that commercial health plans pay hospitals for the in-network services they offer members are ultimately passed onto their members, such as the Plaintiffs, in the form of commercial health insurance premiums. Thus, the insurance premiums paid by commercial health plan members increase when the plans are forced to purchase services from hospitals at higher rates. Health plan members also pay directly for the costs of medical services provided by hospitals in the form of co-insurance payments and other out of pocket payments, such as co-pays.

103. In a competitive market, hospitals compete to be selected for inclusion in commercial health plans. Then, commercial health plans compete to be selected by employers to offer to their workers, or they compete to be selected by individuals.

B. Hospital/Insurance negotiations in the absence of competition.

104. The unique mechanics of the healthcare market described above provide an opportunity for hospital conglomerates with significant market power to illegally restrain trade through unduly restrictive negotiations and agreements with commercial health plans that extract supracompetitive prices. Supracompetitive prices are rates that are higher than what would be found in the context of normal competition. In the market for hospital services, supracompetitive prices come in the form of inflated allowed amounts, which directly lead to higher insurance premiums and coinsurance payments.

105. When a commercial health plan seeks to offer a plan in a region where a significant area is controlled by a single hospital, that hospital is in effect a “must have” hospital for that health plan: Individuals and employers seeking insurance will not choose any health plan that does not include necessary services provided by that hospital.

106. If a “must have” hospital decides to engage in anticompetitive behavior, it can cause significant financial harm to both commercial health plans as well as employers and individuals purchasing such plans. First, a “must have” hospital can demand from commercial health plans allowed amounts that are grossly above what the hospital could obtain if it faced competition. This is true both by virtue of the hospital’s extant market power, as well as the enormously high barriers to entry when it comes to many services hospitals provide. These barriers to entry, which include the costs of building facilities and hiring skilled staff (such as surgeons and anesthesiologists) as well as regulatory hurdles such as obtaining a certificate of need from the State before opening a new facility, prevent new entrants from entering the market and reining in the price the “must have” hospital can charge. Second, if the “must have” hospital is part of a system that has other facilities that *do* face competition, the hospital system can refuse to offer medical services at the

“must have” facility unless commercial health plans also agree to purchase medical services from the system’s other facilities at high prices dictated by the hospital system.

107. These factors and others have led to a consensus in the field of healthcare economics that monopolization of hospital markets significantly increases prices for hospital services paid by commercial health plans and by employers and individuals, in the form of higher direct payments to hospitals and higher insurance premiums. And the economic literature strongly suggests that there are no concomitant improvements in quality from such monopolization. HCA itself stated in a regulatory filing in Florida, “there is documented empirical evidence of the negative aspects of lack of competition in a healthcare market on charges, costs, and quality of care” and that “economic studies consistently demonstrate that a reduction in hospital competition leads to higher prices for hospital care.”

C. Relevant markets

108. Judgment may be entered against Defendants for the illegal conduct described in this complaint without defining the particular economic markets that Defendants’ conduct has harmed. Defendants’ ability to impose anticompetitive contract terms in all, or nearly all, of its agreements with commercial insurers and their ability to persistently charge supracompetitive prices are direct evidence of Defendants’ market power that obviates any need for further analysis of competitive effects in particular defined markets. Moreover, market definitions are unnecessary because Defendants’ anticompetitive behavior is a *per se* violation of N.C.G.S. § 75-1 *et seq.*

109. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the relevant markets at issue in this case are defined herein. For each, the product market includes only the purchase of medical services by commercial health plans, including individual, group, fully insured, and self-funded health plans, as well as related payments by patients directly to providers through coinsurance or otherwise. The relevant

product markets do not include sales of such services to government payers, e.g., Medicare, Medicaid, and TRICARE (covering military families), because a healthcare providers' negotiations with commercial health plans are separate from the process used to determine the rates paid by government payers.

110. The three markets that are relevant to the illegal conduct described in this complaint are properly defined as follows:

1. Primary Relevant Market: Asheville Region Inpatient Services

111. A relevant market in which Defendants have unlawfully maintained and leveraged their monopoly power is the sale of inpatient general acute care hospital services to insurers (or self-funded TPAs) in Buncombe and Madison Counties (the "Asheville Region Inpatient Services Market"). Defendants participate in the Asheville Region Inpatient Services Market predominately through their flagship facility, Mission Hospital-Asheville.

112. The sale of acute inpatient general acute care (previously defined as GAC) hospital services is a relevant product market. Acute inpatient hospital services consist of a broad group of medical and surgical diagnostic and treatment services that include a patient's overnight stay in the hospital. Although individual acute inpatient hospital services are not substitutes for each other (e.g., orthopedic surgery is not a substitute for gastroenterology), commercial health plans typically contract for various individual acute inpatient hospital services as a cluster in a single negotiation with a hospital system. That is how Defendants negotiate with insurers with respect to acute inpatient hospital services at Mission Hospital-Asheville. Moreover, non-hospital facilities, such as outpatient facilities, specialty facilities (such nursing homes), and facilities that provide long-term psychiatric care, substance abuse treatment, and rehabilitation services are not viable substitutes for acute inpatient hospital services. Consequently, commercial health plans'

and consumers' demand for acute inpatient hospital services is generally inelastic because such services are often necessary to prevent death or long-term harm to health. Thus, such services can be treated analytically as a single product market.

113. The relevant geographic market for this product market is Buncombe and Madison Counties (the "Asheville Region"). Defendants themselves have specified Mission Hospital-Asheville's service area to include Buncombe and Madison Counties.¹² The Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care—a well-established industry authority that defines geographic hospital markets—defines the "Health Referral Region" for all of the Mission System hospitals as "NC-ASHEVILLE."¹³ The 2010 census reported the population of Buncombe County was 238,318 and the population of Madison County was 20,764.

114. Commercial health plans contract to purchase acute inpatient hospital services from hospitals within the geographic area where their enrollees are likely to seek medical care. Such hospitals are typically close to their enrollees' homes or workplaces. Insurers who seek to sell commercial health plans to individuals and employers in the Asheville Region must include hospitals in that region in their provider networks, because people who live and work in the Asheville Region strongly prefer to obtain acute inpatient hospital services in that area and it could be medically inappropriate and unfeasible to require them to travel farther. Consumers in the Asheville Region have little or no willingness or practical ability to enroll in a commercial health plan that provides no network access to acute inpatient hospital services located in the Asheville Region.

¹² *E.g.*, Mission Hospital Implementation Strategy, 2013-15, p. 1 ("Our community, defined for the purposes of community health needs assessment and this related implementation strategy, is comprised of Buncombe and Madison Counties."), <https://missionhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2013-Mission-Hospital-Implementation-Strategy.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2021). *See also* IRS Form 990 for period ending September 2019, Schedule H, supplemental information ("Mission Hospital primarily serves Buncombe and Madison Counties").

¹³ Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care, <https://www.dartmouthatlas.org/about/> (accessed July 12, 2021).

115. For these reasons, there are no reasonable substitutes or alternatives to acute inpatient hospital services in the Asheville Region for insurers wishing to offer commercial health plans in that area. Nor is it viable for patients to seek acute inpatient hospital services elsewhere. Consequently, competition from providers of acute inpatient hospital services located outside the Asheville Region would not likely be sufficient to prevent a hypothetical monopolist provider of acute hospital services located in the Asheville Region from profitably imposing small but significant price increases for those services over a sustained period of time.

116. Defendants have a market share of approximately 80% to 90% for acute inpatient hospital services in Buncombe County and Madison County, primarily due to the regional dominance of Mission Hospital-Asheville. Defendants' market share in this market is significant enough to stifle competition and restrict freedom of commerce, and, during the relevant period, Defendants have had the ability to control the price for this market.

2. *Other Relevant Markets*

a. Asheville Region Outpatient Services

117. A second relevant market is the sale of outpatient medical services to insurers in Buncombe and Madison Counties ("Asheville Region Outpatient Services Market"). In general, outpatient medical services encompass all the medical services a hospital provides that are not inpatient medical services (i.e., services that do not require an overnight stay). Defendants participate in this market through their flagship facility, Mission Hospital-Asheville, and other HCA/Mission outpatient facilities in Buncombe and Madison counties.

118. The sale of outpatient medical services is a relevant product market. Outpatient medical services consist of a broad group of medical, diagnostic, and treatment services that do not include a patient's overnight stay in the hospital. Although individual outpatient medical

services are not substitutes for each other (e.g., a CT scan is not a substitute for an annual physical), commercial health plans typically contract for various individual outpatient medical services as a cluster in a single negotiation with a hospital system, and that is how Defendants negotiate with insurers with respect to outpatient hospital services at Mission Hospital-Asheville.

119. Unlike for acute inpatient hospital services, non-hospital facilities—such as independent primary care providers, specialty facilities, ambulatory surgical centers, nursing homes and facilities that provide long-term psychiatric care, substance abuse treatment, and rehabilitation services—can be substitutes for outpatient medical services provided at a hospital. Consequently, insurers’ and consumers’ demand for outpatient medical services *from a hospital* is generally more elastic because, if given the opportunity, they could obtain some of these services from non-hospital providers. But demand for outpatient medical services *in general* is inelastic because such services are often necessary to prevent illness, loss of physical mobility, or long-term harm to health. Thus, outpatient medical services can be treated analytically as a single product market.

120. As with the primary relevant market described above, Asheville Region Inpatient Services, the relevant geographic market for this market is the Asheville Region.

121. Insurers contract to purchase outpatient medical services from hospitals and non-hospital providers within the geographic area where their enrollees are likely to seek medical care. Such providers are typically close to their enrollees’ homes or workplaces. Insurers who seek to sell insurance plans to individuals and employers in the Asheville Region must include providers in that Region in their provider networks, because people who live and work in the Asheville Region strongly prefer to obtain outpatient medical services in that area, and it could be medically inappropriate to require them to travel farther. Consumers in the Asheville Region have little or

no willingness or practical ability to enroll in an insurance plan that provides no network access to outpatient medical services located in the Asheville Region.

122. For these reasons, there are no reasonable substitutes or alternatives to outpatient medical services in the Asheville Region for insurers wishing to offer insurance plans in that area. Nor is it viable for patients to seek outpatient medical services elsewhere. Consequently, competition from providers of outpatient medical services located outside the Asheville Region would not likely be sufficient to prevent a hypothetical monopolist provider of outpatient medical services located in the Asheville area from profitably imposing small but significant price increases for those services over a sustained period of time.

123. The Asheville Region Outpatient Services Market is a separate market from the Asheville Region Inpatient Services Market because they are not interchangeable and can be sold separately. Commercial health plans can and often do purchase outpatient services from different providers (i.e., non-hospital providers) than they purchase acute inpatient hospital services, which can only be purchased from hospitals. The existence of non-hospital competitors would, in a competitive market absent any anticompetitive behavior, reduce the price commercial health plans would pay a hospital for outpatient medical services, but those competitors would not affect the price a hospital could charge for acute inpatient hospital services. The markets are therefore distinct.

b. Outlying Regions Inpatient and Outpatient Services

124. Other relevant markets at issue in this case involve the markets for (a) acute inpatient hospital services, and (b) outpatient medical services, in Outlying Regions in Western North Carolina in which or near where Defendants operate five Outlying Facilities. (“Outlying Regions Inpatient and Outpatient Services Market”).

125. The relevant products in these markets—acute inpatient hospital services and outpatient medical services—are defined the same as for the Asheville Region, and those definitions in the preceding paragraphs are realleged here.

126. The relevant geographic markets for these markets include the regions inclusive of Macon, McDowell, Mitchell, Transylvania and Yancey Counties (the “Outlying Regions”) in which, or near which, Defendants’ five outlying facilities (the “Outlying Facilities”) operate:

- **Transylvania Regional Hospital**, Transylvania County
- **Angel Medical Center**, Macon County
- **Highlands-Cashiers Hospital**, Macon County
- **Mission Hospital McDowell**, McDowell County
- **Blue Ridge Regional Hospital**, Mitchell County

127. Unlike Mission Hospital-Asheville, several of these Outlying Facilities face some competition for acute inpatient hospital services and compared to Mission Hospital-Asheville they face more significant competition for outpatient medical services, from other hospitals and non-hospital providers in the geographic regions in which they operate. Thus, due to this heightened level of competition, commercial health plans seeking to build a viable insurance network may not, absent Defendants’ anticompetitive conduct, be required to include all these facilities in-network in order to be viable. Or commercial health plans would be able to negotiate a lower price for acute inpatient hospital services or outpatient medical services at these facilities.

128. The Outlying Regions Inpatient and Outpatient Market is a separate market from the Asheville Region Inpatient Services Market because they are not interchangeable and can be sold separately. Despite some geographic overlap, the two markets involve different facilities, operating primarily in different regions, and they offer different types of service. For instance, in the Asheville Region, Defendants offer acute trauma care, whereas this service is not offered by any of the Outlying Facilities. Moreover, some of Defendants’ Outlying Facilities face more

competition from other providers than Defendants' facility at Mission Hospital-Asheville faces, particularly for acute inpatient hospital services. Commercial health plans can and often do purchase outpatient services from different providers (i.e., non-hospital providers) than they purchase acute inpatient hospital services from, which can only be purchased from hospitals. The competition the Outlying Facilities face from both other hospitals and non-hospital facilities would, in a competitive market absent any anticompetitive behavior, reduce the price commercial health plans would pay the Outlying Facilities for inpatient and outpatient services, but those competitors would not have an effect on the price a hospital could charge for acute inpatient hospital services in the Asheville Region. The markets are therefore distinct.¹⁴

D. Defendants' Market Power

129. Since the repeal of the COPA in 2016, Defendants have operated an unregulated monopoly in the Asheville Region, particularly with respect to acute inpatient hospital services. Defendants have likewise leveraged their monopolistic market power to increase their dominance and pricing in the markets for Asheville Region Outpatient Services and the Outlying Regions Inpatient and Outpatient Facilities. This has resulted in a situation where, both within the Asheville Region and its surrounding areas, Defendants are able to control the prices paid by commercial health plans and patients.

130. Defendants have a market share of 80 to 90% for acute inpatient hospital services in both Buncombe County and Madison County, i.e., the Asheville Region Inpatient Services Market. The Medicare Hospital Market Service Area File for the calendar year ending December 31, 2019, reflects that, with regard to inpatient origin for the top three zip codes, Mission Hospital-Asheville's market share was as follows: market share of 88.9% for zip code of residence 28806;

¹⁴ See also alternative market allegations under Count I.

market share of 86.5% for zip code of residence 28803; and market share of 87% for zip code of residence 28715.¹⁵

131. While sometimes not as high as in Asheville, Defendants also have significant market share in certain surrounding geographic regions, in part because they can exert control over referrals in those regions through their dominance at Mission Hospital-Asheville. Outside of Asheville, Defendants' market share often exceeds 75% in areas where Defendants have only a small hospital with less than 30 beds but where a large portion of patients are also directed to the more distant Mission Hospital-Asheville. Defendants have used their monopoly in acute inpatient hospital services in Buncombe and Madison Counties to attempt to monopolize inpatient and outpatient services in other counties like Macon, McDowell, and Mitchell—each of which where they now hold above 70% market share for inpatient hospital services when combining inpatient referrals to Asheville and their small regional hospitals' inpatient services. Alternatively, Defendants have established additional monopolies in each of these counties where they hold over a 70% market share (See Count I below).

132. Defendants have maintained this market share since the COPA's repeal because of the anticompetitive negotiating and contracting practices at issue in this suit. These anticompetitive practices, described in more detail hereafter, have led directly to significant price increases at all of Defendants' facilities, for both inpatient and outpatient care, and these higher prices have led directly to severely increased premiums paid by Plaintiffs and the putative class.

¹⁵ See American Hospital Directory, available at https://www.ahd.com/free_profile/340002/Mission_Hospital_-_Memorial_Campus/Asheville/North_Carolina/ (accessed June 26, 2021).

VI. DEFENDANTS' ANTICOMPETITIVE PRACTICES HAVE HARMED COMPETITION, RESULTING IN HIGHER PRICES AND WORSE QUALITY

133. During the pertinent times and within the last four years, Defendants have engaged in anticompetitive negotiating tactics with commercial health plans and/or have insisted on contract terms including one or more anticompetitive provisions with insurers. These negotiating tactics and contract clauses have included: tying arrangements and all-or-nothing arrangements, gag clauses, and, on information and belief, non-participating provider rate clauses and anti-tiering or anti-steering arrangements. The use of anticompetitive provisions and arrangements is consistent with the areas of regulatory evasion identified in the Vistnes Report and with HCA's documented use of similar provisions and negotiating tactics in other states.

134. Individually and in combination, these contract provisions are designed to suppress competition and transparency in the market for the sale of acute hospital services and increase the prices Defendants can charge commercial health plans. Defendants use their market power to force insurers to accept these restrictions which have the following anticompetitive effects:

- protecting Defendants' market power and enabling Defendants to raise prices and reduce quality of acute inpatient hospital services substantially beyond what would be tolerated in a competitive market, to the detriment of consumer welfare;
- substantially lessening competition among providers in their sale of acute inpatient hospital services;
- preventing the entry of potential competitors into the market by forcing insurers to agree to terms that bar them from sharing competitive pricing information;
- preventing the entry of potential competitors into the market by forcing insurers to agree to terms that bar them from directing consumers to lower cost providers;
- restricting the introduction of innovative insurance products that are designed to achieve lower prices and improved quality for acute inpatient hospital services;
- reducing consumers' incentives and ability to seek or even be aware of acute inpatient hospital services from more cost-effective providers; and

- depriving consumers of the benefits of a competitive market for their purchase of inpatient hospital services.

135. These types of arrangements and agreements have been found to be illegal even in markets with more robust provider competition than exists here, due to their inherent harm to consumer welfare and competition. However, because Defendants have an unregulated monopoly (instead of a built-out market power in a free market), the illegal anticompetitive impacts on consumers are much more severe. Most obviously, healthcare costs in the Western North Carolina market area that Defendants control are now dramatically higher than the North Carolina average and still rising while quality is declining.

136. Anticompetitive contract provisions and negotiating tactics are particularly problematic when a provider controls a “must have” hospital, as HCA acquired here when it acquired Mission Hospital-Asheville. It is not practically possible to assemble a commercially viable insurance plan in Western North Carolina that excludes Mission Hospital-Asheville. In a market with a “must have” hospital, even the limited use of these contract provisions or negotiating tactics causes much greater harm to consumers and potential competitors than the use of such practices and provisions in a competitive market.

137. On information and belief, HCA/Mission has been among the most intransigent of all systems in North Carolina during contract renewals and other negotiations with insurers. Defendants have continued to insist on higher prices for declining quality of service because they are aware of their “must have” status for commercial health plans and TPAs.

138. An insurance official summed up the problem with HCA/Mission in two words: “their price.” The excessive price increases being billed directly and indirectly to Plaintiffs and other patients would have been unlawful under the COPA, unsustainable in a competitive market, and unrealistic before the HCA takeover.

A. **Defendants willfully and unlawfully acquired and/or maintained monopoly power**

139. Neither Mission nor HCA acquired monopoly power by outcompeting rivals on price and quality as our antitrust laws envision. Instead, Mission became a monopoly solely by virtue of a merger that would have been unlawful under the antitrust law but that was shielded from suit by the protection the COPA gave from antitrust scrutiny.

140. Once Mission became so large as to be both indispensable to commercial health plans and insulated from any meaningful competition, particularly for acute inpatient hospital services, Mission's executives sought and obtained the COPA's repeal, freeing it from any relevant government restrictions. HCA then purchased the monopoly in a cross-market merger and has further exploited the system's market dominance by raising prices and cutting costs in ways that have harmed quality of care. Now and for the last several years, neither Mission nor HCA has immunity from antitrust liability, meaning their unlawful acquisition and maintenance of this monopoly is properly the subject of this lawsuit.

1. While the COPA was in effect, Mission circumvented its restrictions to gain additional market power and raise prices

141. The COPA did not directly regulate the prices Mission could charge for services, but it sought to do so indirectly through several limitations on the way Mission could do business. Most notably, the COPA imposed three purported caps on Mission's operations: a margin cap, a cost cap, and an employed-physician cap.

142. The COPA's margin cap on Mission was systemwide—Mission as a whole was not allowed to raise its profit margin by more than a certain amount compared to comparable hospitals. But the cost cap was specific only to Mission Hospital-Asheville: That facility could only increase

its costs at the same rate as a national index, but there was no limit on how much Mission could increase its costs at other facilities.

143. In 2011, the Vistnes Report concluded that this structure gave Mission an incentive to increase spending on Outlying Facilities—including by purchasing new ones—so as to push its overall costs up, thereby allowing it raise prices to earn a higher profit while still meeting the percentage margin cap.

144. Under the COPA, Mission grew its market share in Western North Carolina. It did so by acquiring the five smaller Outlying Facilities, each time eliminating a competitor in the process. In doing so, Mission could increase its costs without affecting the cost cap, thereby allowing it to increase prices at all of its facilities without violating the COPA’s margin cap.

145. Thus, while the COPA was designed to ensure Mission’s recognized monopoly power in the market for acute inpatient hospital services did not harm consumers in the region, Mission grew substantially more dominant by acquiring competing practices, expanding its geographic reach, and moving costs from Mission Hospital-Asheville to its Outlying Facilities. This caused Mission’s prices to raise across the board, including for acute inpatient hospital services.

146. In 2019, after the COPA was repealed, two FTC economists, Lien Tran and Rena Schwarz, concluded that the COPA’s margin and caps did not prevent Mission from raising prices 20 percent more than similarly situated hospitals: “The evidence suggests that, despite the margin/cost regulations, the COPA oversight did not prevent [Mission] from raising prices.”

147. As a result of these findings, the FTC in 2020 held up the example of the Mission Hospital COPA as a reason why a COPA proposed for another State, Texas, should not be allowed:

In 2015, the North Carolina legislature repealed the state’s COPA statute as a result of lobbying efforts by Mission Health, and the Mission Health COPA was

terminated as of September 2016 – leaving no meaningful competitive or regulatory constraint on Mission Health’s monopoly market power. In February 2019, Mission Health was acquired by HCA Healthcare.

At the FTC COPA Workshop, empirical research was presented on the price effects of the Mission Health COPA for inpatient hospital services from 1996 to 2008. The study showed that Mission Health increased its prices by at least 20% more than the control hospitals during the COPA period, suggesting that despite the margin and cost regulations, state COPA oversight did not prevent Mission Health from raising prices....

Kip Sturgis, from the North Carolina Attorney General’s office, was responsible for overseeing the Mission Health COPA for nearly 20 years. Mr. Sturgis explained that in hindsight, he would have implemented more quality metrics and financial incentives for the hospital to control costs. He does not recommend that states use COPAs due to the potential for regulatory evasion during the COPA period, and the ability of hospitals to eventually be freed of COPA oversight, which leaves the community with an unregulated monopoly.

2. *HCA purchased Mission in order to acquire a monopoly system and exploit that market power*

148. After the COPA was repealed, HCA acquired Mission precisely because of its (now unregulated) monopoly power, and with the knowledge that, as a larger national for-profit chain, it would be better positioned to exploit Mission Health’s monopoly power in Western North Carolina. As noted at the time:

- A former HCA executive remarked: “[I]t is a high growth market *where they have no competition* and their margins are already strong” and “HCA is parachuting into Asheville and getting the benefit of a COPA *without any restrictions.*” (Emphases added).
- A leading healthcare finance reporter observed that the Mission acquisition “fits with HCA’s longstanding strategy of scooping up facilities that dominate their markets, which helps the company negotiate better rates with health insurers.”
- HCA in communicating with Wall Street analysts has called Mission a “market maker” that “need[ed] to be a part of something bigger,” citing the acquisition as a “model” for acquiring market power. Shortly after the acquisition, HCA executives told Wall Street analysts that the company’s “market share has reached an all-time high using the most recently available data. *But we are pushing for more.*” (Emphasis added).

149. Prior to the HCA acquisition of the Mission system, HCA owned hospitals in a variety of important markets across the country, but not in North Carolina. Thus, when HCA acquired Mission, it was not the case of one competitor in the same town or region acquiring another. Rather, a dominant hospital owner in many other markets (HCA) acquired the dominant hospital system in the Western North Carolina market (Mission).

150. According to peer-reviewed published studies, one effect of a cross-market or multi-market merger is to cause an increase in healthcare prices.

151. On information and belief, HCA uses its market power via its ownership of hospitals in other markets to leverage insurance companies to agree to higher prices at HCA/Mission hospitals, and vice versa.

152. The FTC has on multiple occasions challenged in-market mergers due to the anticompetitive effect of such mergers.

153. A cross-market merger of the type that has occurred here likewise has an anticompetitive effect.

154. In 2019, 61 percent of US workers with employer-sponsored health coverage were enrolled in self-insured plans, including 17 percent in small firms and 80 percent in large firms.¹⁶

155. Large firms likely have territories extending beyond the 18-county scope of the Western North Carolina region identified by HCA as Mission's extended service area.

156. When large self-funded employers negotiate with HCA, it becomes relevant to the negotiation that HCA not only owns hospitals in NC but also in many other states.

¹⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019 Employer Health Benefits Survey, Sept. 25, 2019, <https://www.kff.org/report-section/ehbs-2019-summary-of-findings/> (accessed Aug. 3, 2021).

157. Large self-funded employers are currently unable to restrain increases in healthcare prices caused by the concentration of market power into large for-profit hospital chains like HCA.¹⁷

158. Allowing HCA to join into its national network the monopoly in Western North Carolina increases the anticompetitive effect of the monopoly far beyond where it was when only local nonprofit Mission owned it.

159. Large self-funded employers and their TPAs pay more for access to the Mission hospital monopoly as part of HCA's Western North Carolina region than they would pay for that access if Mission was only part of a western North Carolina hospital network.

160. The antitrust law restrains mergers to the extent that such combinations may tend to lessen competition.

161. The asset sale of the Mission Hospital monopoly from old owner Mission to new owner HCA was an unlawful merger or acquisition because it resulted in a lessening of competition.

B. Defendants abuse their monopoly power by unreasonably negotiating with commercial health plans and charging supracompetitive prices

1. *Mission unreasonably withheld essential services from commercial health plans and raised prices to supracompetitive levels after the COPA's repeal*

162. As noted above, Mission raised prices much more than regulators anticipated—or were even aware about—while the COPA was in effect. These high prices were the result of regulatory evasion by Mission and they were concealed by gag clauses. Mission's public statements regarding its costs and prices were inaccurate, unfair, and deceptive.

¹⁷ Matthew D. Eisenberg, Mark K. Meiselbach, Ge Bai, Aditi P. Sen, Gerard Anderson, Large Self-insured Employers Lack Power to Effectively Negotiate Hospital Prices, *The American Journal of Managed Care*, July 13, 2021, Volume 27, Issue 7, <https://www.ajmc.com/view/large-self-insured-employers-lack-power-to-effectively-negotiate-hospital-prices> (accessed Aug. 3, 2021).

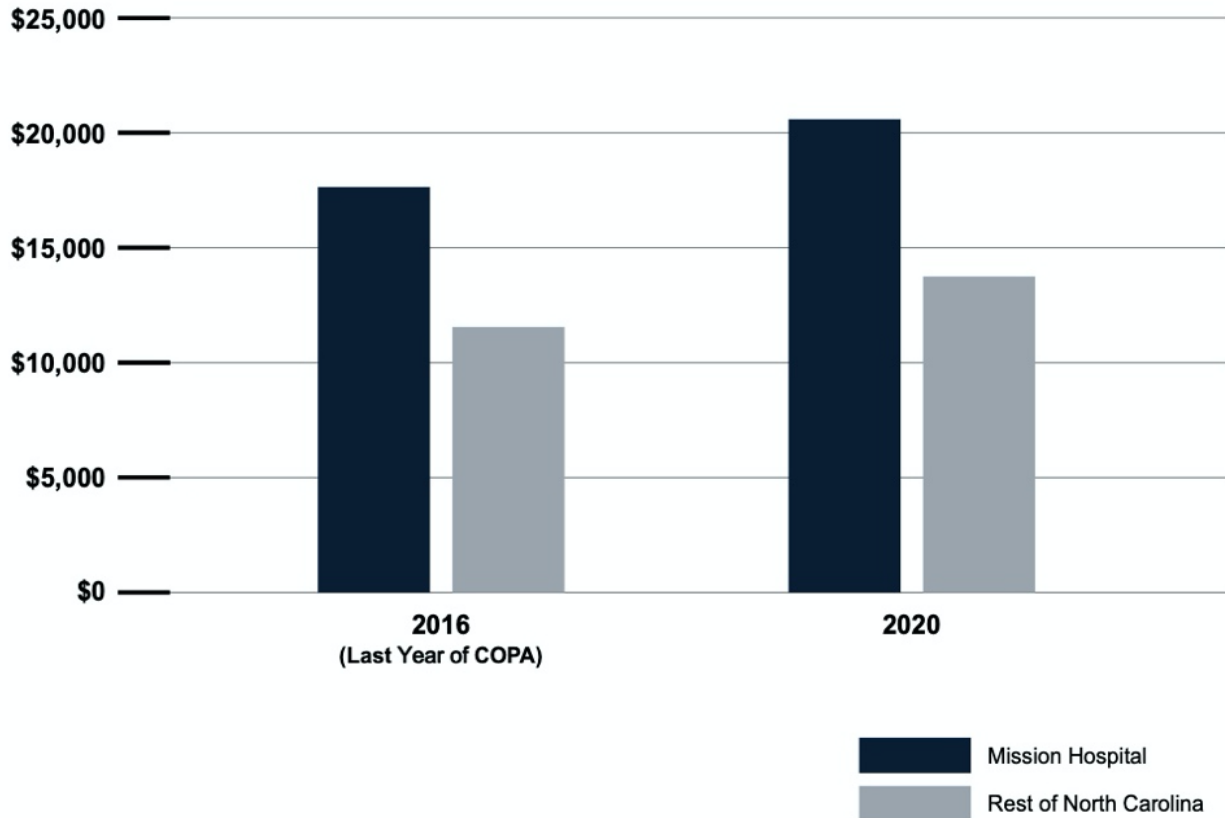
163. But the situation got worse after the COPA was repealed and Mission was free from any semblance of State oversight. Specifically, after the COPA was repealed, two things relevant to healthcare cost and quality in Western North Carolina happened almost immediately: (1) Mission negotiated with insurers for price increases in aggressive ways the COPA would have prevented, and (2) Mission executives began secretly negotiating a sale to HCA.

164. In 2017, Mission engaged in its first major post-COPA negotiation with Blue Cross, the State's largest health plan, over reimbursement rates. While details of the negotiations were kept secret, on information and belief Mission asked for exorbitant increases in the prices Blue Cross and its members were paying. When Blue Cross did not agree, Mission took its entire system "out of network," meaning that the 260,000 people in Western North Carolina insured by Blue Cross could not seek care at Mission facilities unless they paid much higher prices out of their own pocket. While hospital systems and insurers regularly negotiate over rates, a hospital system taking an insurer out of network is considered "go[ing] nuclear." This disrupted the administration of healthcare in the region, requiring Blue Cross members to switch doctors, forgo medical care, or drive long distances to receive care at a non-Mission facility. Mission remained out of network for Blue Cross for two months, until the two parties reached an agreement in which on information and belief Mission still received a rate increase but not as high as originally demanded. On information and belief, Mission's aggressive and unreasonable stance in these negotiations would not have occurred under the COPA.

165. While the resolution of that dispute was kept secret, available data confirms that Mission got much of what it wanted: significantly higher prices for GAC services. After the COPA was repealed, the allowed amount Mission received from commercial health plans increased substantially, beyond what would be found in a competitive market. For example, within a large

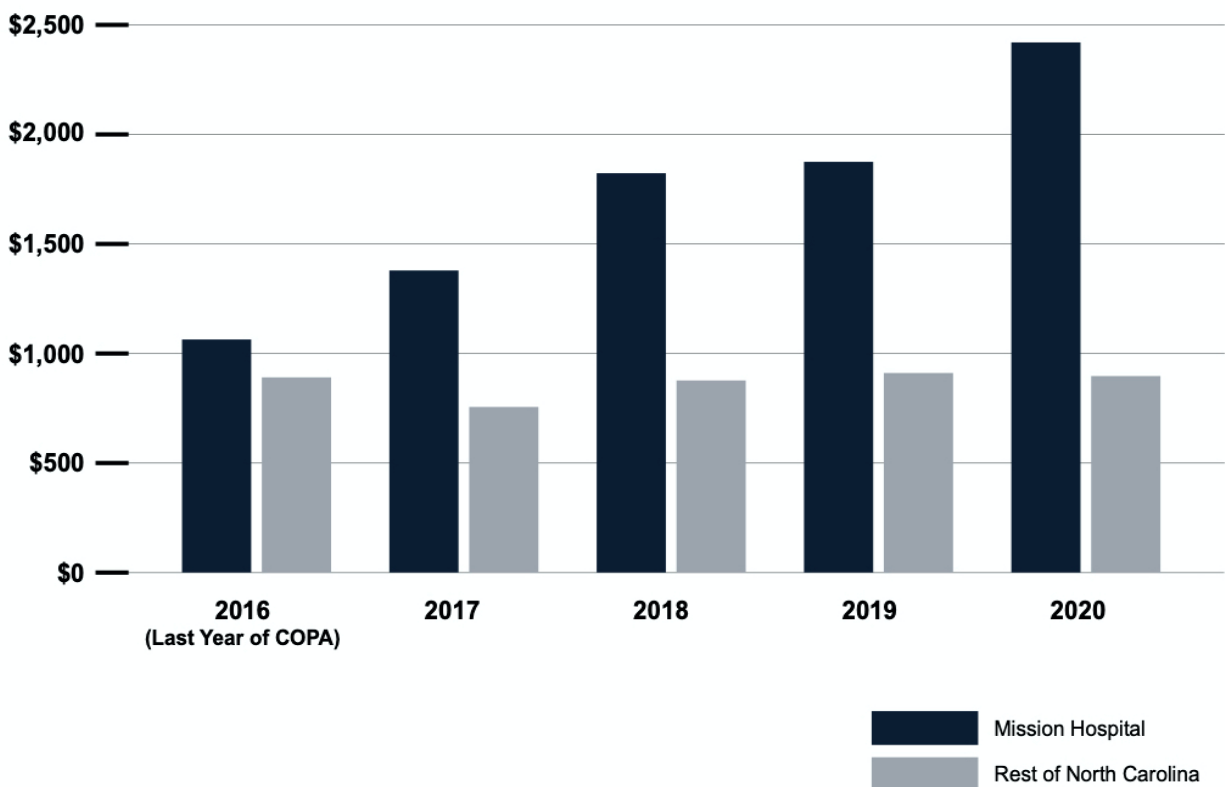
commercial claims dataset, the average allowed amount paid by most commercial insurers to Mission, and later HCA, for knee replacements, was higher than for the rest of North Carolina, and stayed higher, with the gap the same or growing over time:

Knee Replacement



166. For a shoulder arthroscopy, the rest of North Carolina’s costs have stayed relatively stable with allowed amounts averaging just under \$1,000 from 2016 to 2020. However, Mission’s average allowed amount in the same dataset went up from about \$1,000 in the last year of the COPA to about \$2,400 in 2020—an increase of close to 150% in four years:

Shoulder Arthroscopy



167. According to the same large claims commercial dataset, these allowed amount increases were consistent across most services lines, particularly (but not exclusively) at Mission Hospital-Asheville and for acute inpatient hospital services. Thus, while Mission could move costs around under the COPA and increase prices, the data show that once freed from the COPA’s restrictions Mission could effectively dictate the prices it charged in a manner that no other system in North Carolina could.

2. *HCA increased prices substantially after acquiring the hospital from Mission while cutting staff and reducing quality*

168. Once the nonprofit Mission became the for-profit HCA, prices rose at an even higher rate than the State average, while at the same time HCA cut staffing to dangerously low

levels to further increase its profit. This resulted in more expensive and lower quality care for Plaintiffs and other members of the putative class.

169. HCA/Mission is currently one of the most expensive hospitals in the State, and for many procedures—including “plausibly undifferentiated” procedures for which quality does not meaningfully vary by provider—it is *the* most expensive provider in the State.

170. A recent RAND analysis of nationwide hospital pricing data compared the prices negotiated between hospitals and commercial health plans to the fee schedule set by Medicare, with the Medicare price acting as a relative baseline (given the federal government’s regulatory power). RAND reported this data analysis at the hospital systemwide level, without revealing the prices charged for specific procedures.

171. According to RAND data, at Mission Hospital-Asheville Defendants charged commercial insurers 372% above the Medicare price, on average, for inpatient and outpatient services, and 393% above the Medicare price, on average, for inpatient services alone. That compares with a mean of 262% and a median of 277% above Medicare for all hospitals in North Carolina for which RAND released metrics (including Mission).

172. Defendants could not charge this much more than other North Carolina hospitals if they were not (1) unlawfully leveraging monopoly power to force insurers to accept rates they would not accept in a competitive market and (2) using anticompetitive means to prevent new entrants from competing.

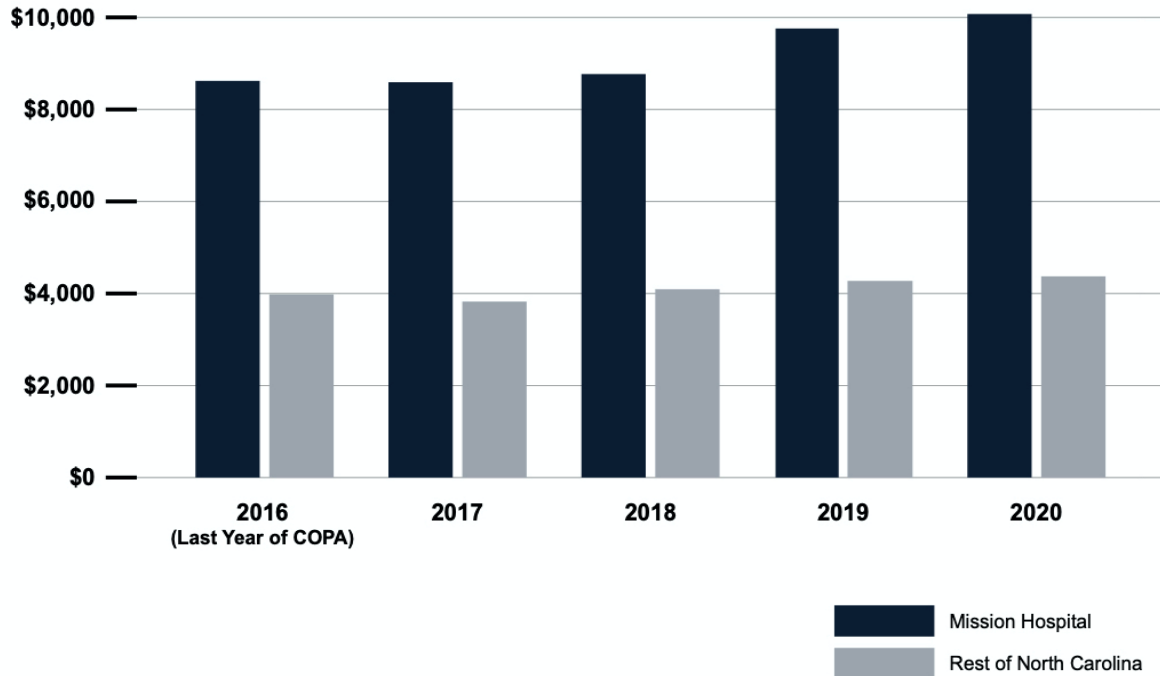
173. In much the same way that Mission in 2017 took Blue Cross out of network as part of a price dispute, a similar fight unfolded two years later, this time with HCA in control. In 2019, HCA used aggressive contract negotiating tactics to attempt to force Cigna, another major insurer, to accept significant price increases. Cigna said that HCA/Mission’s “excessively high rates they

are demanding from our clients and customers” would “put affordable healthcare at risk.” HCA/Mission’s price demands were so excessive that, once again, there was the risk of all customers of a large insurer losing access to the only hospital in their area. Two contract disputes of this level within two years are rare for almost any hospital system and would have been barred by the COPA.

174. HCA itself stated in recent regulatory filings in Florida that, in a county with a monopoly hospital system, insurers have “limited ability” to “negotiate market-driven rates for hospital services” and that, “A large and growing body of literature suggests that health care providers with significant market power can (and do) negotiate higher-than-competitive payment rates.”

175. Data analysis of specific procedures comports with the systemwide RAND results. For example, within a large commercial claims dataset, HCA’s average allowed amount earned from commercial health plans for C-sections without complications at Mission Hospital-Asheville was approximately \$9,764 in 2019 and \$10,077 in 2020. By contrast, the average allowed amount at all other North Carolina hospitals was \$4,287 in 2019 and \$4,373 in 2020. The HCA price is over 2.2 times greater than the rest of North Carolina. And while the price of C-sections at all other North Carolina hospitals was relatively stable from 2016 to 2020 near \$4,000, the prices at Mission/HCA rose from \$8,621 to over \$10,000 for service at the Asheville hospital. The data may be visualized as follows:

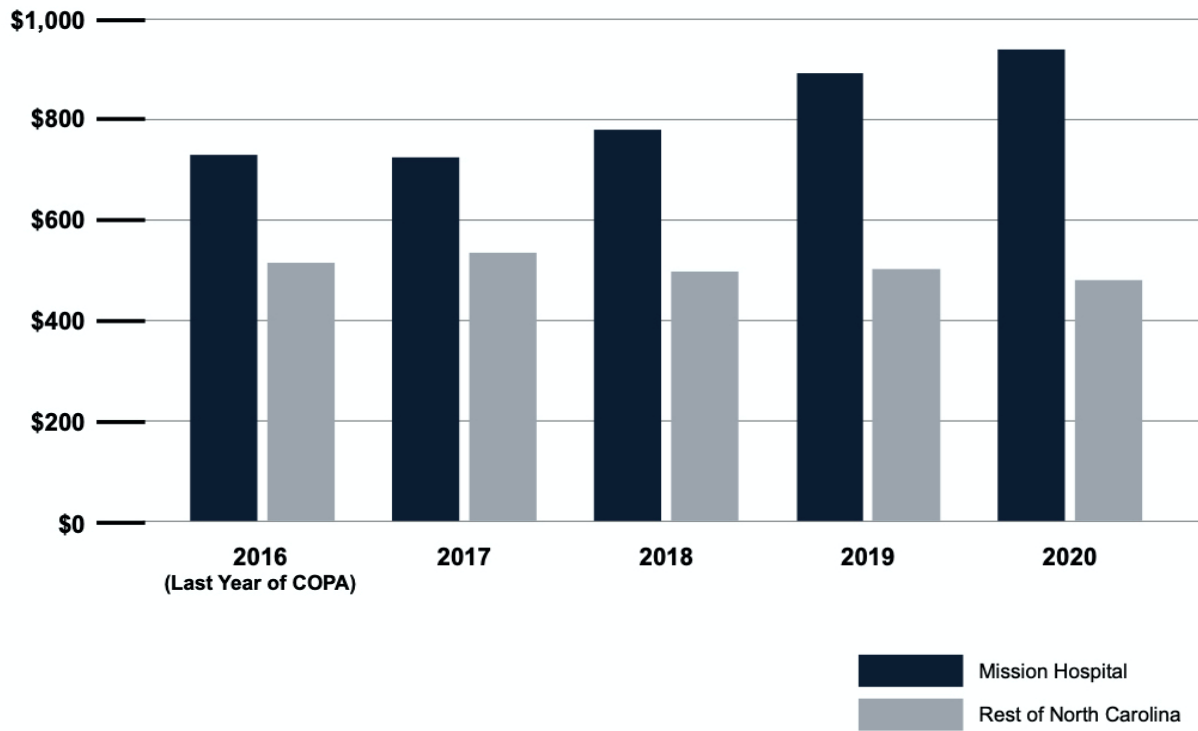
C-Section Birth



176. Similarly, within that same claims data, HCA's average allowed amount for a coronary bypass is nearly *double* the North Carolina average and, after the repeal of the COPA, Mission Hospital-Asheville has been the most expensive major hospital in the entire State for coronary bypasses.

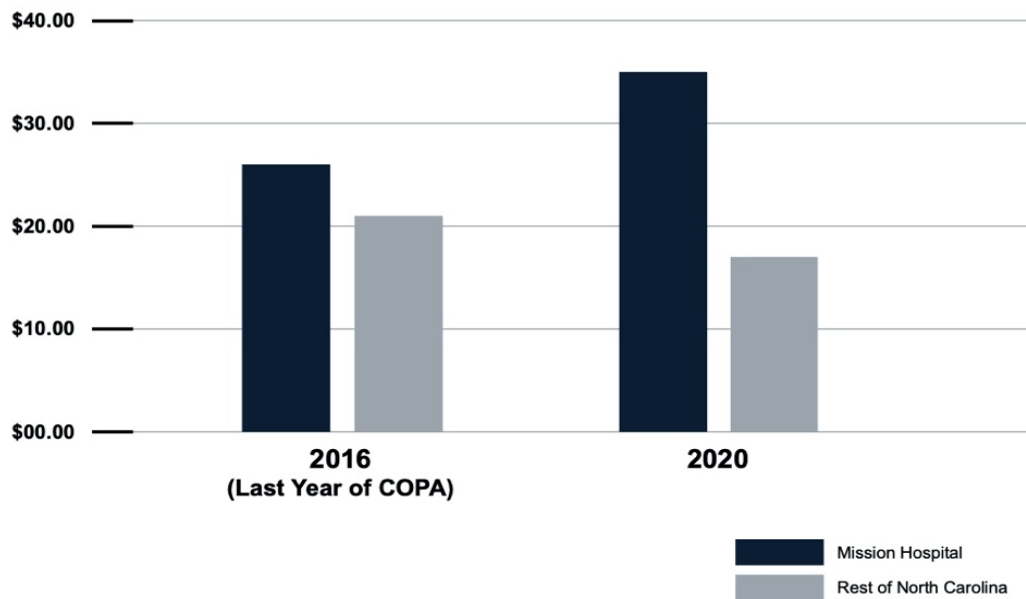
177. Likewise, with regard to cardiovascular stress tests, an average allowed amount for this procedure at HCA was roughly double that of the average allowed amount in the rest of North Carolina in 2020. While the cost for this procedure slightly declined in the rest of North Carolina from 2016 to 2020, the cost at Mission increased about 30% from the last year of the COPA to 2020:

Cardiovascular Stress Test



178. Even low cost but high-volume procedures like a lipid panel have seen significant price increases after the repeal of the COPA. Within a large commercial insurance claims dataset, Mission's average allowed amount for lipid panels increased by about a third while the allowed amount in the rest of the state declined:

Lipid Panel



179. As prices for these services and others have risen, HCA has reduced the quality of its care by aggressively cutting staff and budgets and by encouraging those doctors who have stayed to focus on maximizing the volume of patients they see so as to maximize profits.

180. As of March 2021, at least 79 doctors had left or planned to leave the system since HCA's takeover. Other doctors describe new employment contracts with HCA in which the compensation equations remove quality of care metrics and focus almost entirely on the number of patients seen and amount billed. As one departing doctor explained, "The change in ownership has shifted this system's priority away from the health of Western North Carolina to the health of the stockholders." A significant number of patients have lost their preferred family doctors either due to doctors leaving the system or from HCA's clinic restructurings and closures.

181. Similarly, nurses working at HCA have described their units as "inhumanely understaffed," with conditions so bad that even travel nurses hired to fill in gaps were leaving before their contracts expired. Patients and families describe situations where, for example, their

nurse told them, "... she cries every single night because she knows she is not giving appropriate, competent patient care."

182. Were Defendants operating in a competitive market for acute care services, they would not have been able to take these anticompetitive actions. However, commercial health plans and patients have no choice but to endure the worsening quality of service.

183. As noted, on February 10, 2020, the Chairman of the Buncombe County Commissioners Brownie Newman, Asheville Mayor Esther Manheimer, and most of the delegation of Buncombe County's elected officials in the North Carolina statehouse lambasted these conditions, finding that "numerous, aggressive staff cuts over the past year, put[] patient safety at risk" and that "HCA has aggressively pursued contract renegotiations with multiple physician practices, resulting in unfortunate outcomes."

184. Both anecdotal reports and expert watchdogs have confirmed that these actions have led directly to a decrease in the quality of care. As noted, the Leapfrog Group dropped Mission Hospital's patient safety rating from an "A" to a "B" after HCA's takeover, and CMS also downgraded Mission per surveys of patients' experiences regarding, among other things, responsiveness of hospital staff and the cleanliness of the hospital.

3. *HCA abuses its market power by charging for costly, unnecessary procedures*

185. After the repeal of the COPA, Defendants began more frequently billing for procedures that academic literature has determined are ineffective and are nearly always considered overuse. In fact, Mission Hospital-Asheville now ranks 88 out of 89 hospitals in North Carolina for unnecessary procedures and is in the highest 2% of all hospitals nationwide for billing for unnecessary procedures.¹⁸ It has a "Value of Care" rating of "D-minus."

¹⁸ <https://lownhospitalsindex.org/hospital/memorial-mission-hospital-and-asheville-surgery-center/>.

186. But at the same time, Mission Hospital-Asheville is one of HCA's most profitable in the country, and in fact has immediately become the second largest revenue hospital in the entire HCA chain.¹⁹ HCA revenues from Mission Hospital-Asheville were recently reported to be over \$1.2 billion, ahead of all but one of the other 100-plus hospitals in the HCA chain and second only to HCA's Methodist Hospital (Texas) which has over twice as many beds.

187. In a competitive market, insurers contracting with a hospital can discipline such behavior by threatening in their next negotiation not to cover certain services, to negotiate for caps on particular procedures likely to be unnecessary, or to threaten to take the hospital out of network and purchase services from a competitor. But because of Defendants' unregulated monopoly status, the all-or-nothing tying schemes described herein, and the lack of any significant competitor for inpatient hospital services, insurance plans and consumers are forced to pay for some of the highest rates of unnecessary procedures anywhere in the country.

188. Because HCA controls the only hospital in the Asheville market and because consumers generally do not question provider recommendations while in the hospital, HCA's practice of adding costly and unnecessary procedures to a consumer's bill represents a clear abuse of market power.

189. For example, routine blood tests are a frequent source of price disparities and overbilling by providers with both the volume of tests per patient and the cost of tests per patients varying dramatically by provider. However, in competitive markets, insurers can incentivize providers who do not overuse or overcharge for tests.

¹⁹ Top 50 HCA Hospitals by Net Patient Revenue, <https://www.definitivehc.com/blog/top-hca-hospitals-nationwide> (accessed Aug. 4, 2021) (reflecting that Mission Hospital-Asheville has the second-highest revenues of all of the HCA hospitals, at \$1,209,452,518).

190. On information and belief, Defendants have exploited the lack of competition in the market to charge a substantially higher price than both the North Carolina average and the price that would be tolerated in a hypothetically competitive Asheville market. Defendants have increased prices for routine blood tests, despite no evidence that the actual cost of providing such tests has increased at all. In fact, based on available data, for one routine blood test, Defendants have increased the allowed amount charged to many insurers for the test by about 20% since they acquired Mission Hospital. This leads directly to Plaintiffs and other putative class members paying higher co-insurance for these unnecessary procedures, and it leads to their paying higher insurance premiums because commercial health plans are also liable for their share of the payments for the unnecessarily costly procedures as well.

191. In a competitive market, such overpricing would be aggressively policed by insurers, patients, and competing providers. In this case, since the COPA's repeal left the system unregulated, Defendants have increased prices for often overbilled procedures knowing that commercial health plans and patients have no meaningful choice but to accept these practices. These practices have led directly to the increased costs of commercial insurance for affected consumers.

192. Finally, HCA has charged exorbitant rates for forensic exams such as rape kits, which should be free. Assistant Director of victim advocacy organization REACH of Macon County, Jennifer Turner-Lynn explained that "prior to the [HCA-Mission] merger, we never had an issue with rape victims being charged for the use of the emergency room.... The last victim that I took over received a bill for \$1,000. The only services that she received in the emergency room was to have the rape kit performed." Billing a sexual assault victim for a forensic exam is prohibited under state and federal law. Under N.C.G.S. § 143B-1200, a medical facility cannot

bill a sexual assault victim or commercial health plan for a forensic medical exam. Additionally, the Violence Against Women Act mandates that states must cover the “full out-of-pocket costs of forensic medical examinations for victims of sexual assault” to maintain eligibility for funding. The full cost is defined as “any expense that may be charged to a victim in connection with a forensic medical examination for the purpose of gathering evidence of a sexual assault.”²⁰

4. *HCA abuses its trauma center monopoly*

193. HCA has shown a pattern of using emergency care, and especially trauma centers, to saddle patients with unnecessary, exorbitant charges. Trauma centers employ specialists equipped to deal with major traumatic injuries and receive substantially higher reimbursements for the theoretically complex care. However, in what appears to be a business practice across the nation documented by investigative reporting,²¹ HCA has been shown to be significantly more likely than other providers to admit patients with only mild injuries to trauma centers in order to obtain higher reimbursement rates.

194. In competitive markets, this costly practice can be policed by competitor providers or by insurers who can pressure providers to reduce deceptive trauma center admissions with the threat of taking a provider out-of-network for non-compliance. In a monopoly market with a “must have” hospital and one monopoly trauma center, like the one HCA intentionally acquired from Mission, such policing effectively cannot take place. Absent HCA’s unlawful monopoly power, it would not be able to carry on this practice.

195. As the only state-designated trauma center in Western North Carolina, HCA can set prices far above the market rate. In Asheville, HCA’s trauma center “activation fees”—the

²⁰ 28 C.F.R. § 90.13(b)

²¹ Jay Hancock, In alleged health care ‘money grab,’ nation’s largest hospital chain cashes in on trauma centers, Kaiser Health News, June 14, 2021, <https://khn.org/news/article/in-alleged-health-care-money-grab-nations-largest-hospital-chain-cashes-in-on-trauma-centers/> (accessed Aug. 3, 2021).

charges applied automatically when a patient is routed to the trauma center—are about twice as high as the North Carolina average, costing consumers over \$9,000 for every unnecessary admission, before they even incur procedure charges.

196. Similarly, Defendants have a history of pushing patients into more expensive Emergency Department (“ED”) care. Nationally, a recent study sponsored by shareholders of HCA found that HCA’s Medicare ED admissions were “well-above the national average, growing over time, and not explained by patient case mix,” which resulted in excess Medicare payments of \$1.1 billion over five years.²²

197. On information and belief, HCA engages in this practice in North Carolina, regularly running patients, including those with commercial health plans, through the ED for tests that do not require such an admission and thus charging commercial health plans and patients significantly more. In North Carolina specifically, HCA’s ability to push patients into more expensive ED care is even more unrestrained due to Mission Hospital-Asheville’s effective total control over the market.

198. In a competitive market, a provider that pushed individuals towards higher cost ED care would face strong pressure from commercial health plans and local governments to reduce the practice. In a market with only one hospital, HCA is able to push individuals towards higher cost ED care while simultaneously reducing the quality of the ED. Because of HCA’s market power and use of anti-competitive contract clauses, insurers are less able to push back and may even be contractually blocked from informing consumers about the full extent of the ED practices.

²² Notice of exempt solicitation, CtW investment group, April 1, 2021, <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/860730/00013773921000007/hca21shletter.htm> (accessed Aug. 3, 2021); Oct. 16, 2020 letter from CtW to Charles O. Holliday, Chairman, audit & compliance committee, HCA Healthcare, Inc., <https://s3-prod.modernhealthcare.com/2021-03/CtW%20to%20HCA.pdf> (accessed Aug. 3, 2021).

C. **Defendants have engaged in illegal tying of services through all-or-nothing contracting practices and other anticompetitive contracting terms**

199. Both Mission and HCA have engaged in unlawful tying agreements, through which they have used their monopoly in one market—acute inpatient hospital services in Buncombe and Madison Counties—to extract profits in other markets.

200. Under antitrust law, tying occurs when an entity that has market power in one market leverages that market power in order to reap profits in another market. The market in which the defendant has an existing monopoly is called the “tying” market, and the separate market in which the defendant extracts profits is called the “tied” market. Under a tying arrangement, the entity will sell one product (the tying product) only under the condition that the purchaser buy a second product (the tied product). Where the defendant has significant market power or a monopoly in the tying market, such tying arrangements are considered anticompetitive and unlawful under the antitrust laws.

201. One way tying occurs in hospital markets is through a dominant hospital’s use of “all-or-nothing” practices in their negotiations with insurers. When a hospital system is the only entity in a given region to offer a product or service that commercial health plans must include in their network to be viable, that hospital system can refuse to sell that product or service to insurers unless insurers also agree to purchase other services from the hospital system, including services that the insurer would otherwise purchase from a different hospital system for a lower price. Either orally during negotiations or in the contracts themselves, the hospital system gives the insurer an “all-or-nothing” choice: Take everything the hospital wants to sell at the price the hospital dictates, or get nothing at all. This paradigm was apparent in Mission’s 2017 contract dispute with Blue Cross, where it responded to Blue Cross’ specific concern about proposed price increases at

Mission Hospital-Asheville by making the entire Mission system unavailable to Blue Cross—across multiple geographic markets and both inpatient and outpatient markets.

202. Here, Defendants offer a product that any commercial insurer operating in Western North Carolina needs: the only acute inpatient hospital services in Buncombe and Madison Counties. Due to Mission Hospital-Asheville’s dominant market share for acute inpatient hospital care in Buncombe and Madison Counties, a commercial health plan could not offer a plan that does not include these services and remain commercially viable. Thus, insurers functionally do not have a choice: They must purchase from Defendants acute inpatient hospital care at Mission Hospital-Asheville. Thus, this is the “tying” product. And Mission and HCA have tied it to two different products over which they have less market power: (1) outpatient medical care at Mission Hospital-Asheville and the rest of Buncombe and Madison Counties, and (2) inpatient and outpatient care at Mission’s and HCA’s Outlying Facilities.

1. *Tying inpatient services at Mission Hospital-Asheville to outpatient services at Mission Hospital-Asheville*

203. One way in which Defendants engage in anticompetitive tying is by only offering acute inpatient hospital services at Mission Hospital-Asheville to commercial health plans if those insurers will also contract to purchase outpatient medical services at Mission Hospital-Asheville from Defendants at supracompetitive rates (the “Inpatient/Outpatient Tying Scheme”). When Defendants engage in all-or-nothing contracting in this manner, acute inpatient hospital services at Mission Hospital-Asheville is the “tying” product, and outpatient services at Mission Hospital-Asheville are the “tied” product.

204. While Defendants’ Mission Hospital-Asheville has a 80 to 90 percent market share in the market for acute inpatient hospital services in Buncombe and Madison Counties, Defendants’ face somewhat more competition for outpatient medical services in those markets.

This competition comes from, for example, ambulatory service centers, rehabilitation facilities, and independent physicians. On information and belief, insurers negotiating with Defendants would, absent Defendants' Inpatient/Outpatient Tying Scheme, choose either not to contract for certain outpatient hospital services from HCA at Mission Hospital-Asheville and its other facilities in Buncombe and Madison Counties, or those insurers would negotiate a lower price for those services, given the competition from other outpatient providers in the region. But because Defendants can threaten to withhold their must-have acute inpatient hospital services as part of the same negotiation, commercial health plans must acquiesce to Defendants' demands related to outpatient care.

205. Defendants' Inpatient/Outpatient Tying Scheme has resulted directly in higher costs, both in terms of allowed amounts paid for services at that facility and increased co-pays, premiums, and deductibles for Plaintiffs and the putative class. The Scheme has also harmed competition for outpatient medical services in Buncombe and Madison Counties, because independent providers of outpatient services are unable to fairly compete with Defendants on price or quality. When independent providers cannot compete, they eventually go out of business, which leads to even less competition. On information and belief, because of Defendants' Inpatient/Outpatient Tying Scheme, outpatient facilities have closed or relocated to more competitive markets and would-be competitors for outpatient care have declined to operate in Buncombe and Madison Counties, which has decreased the quantity of outpatient care and increased prices paid by insurers, ultimately, patients for outpatient care.

2. *Tying inpatient services at Mission Hospital-Asheville to inpatient and outpatient services at HCA/Mission's five outlying hospitals*

206. A second tying scheme Defendants have engaged in is the tying of acute inpatient hospital services in Buncombe and Madison Counties to inpatient and outpatient care at the

Outlying Facilities (“Asheville/Outlying Facilities Tying Scheme”). Because any insurer offering a network that includes Western North Carolina must include in that network acute inpatient hospital services at Mission Hospital-Asheville, Defendants are able to force those insurers to also include inpatient and outpatient services at Defendants’ Outlying Facilities in network, at supracompetitive prices. As in the Inpatient/Outpatient Tying Scheme, the “tying” market in the Asheville/Outlying Facilities Tying Scheme is the same: acute inpatient hospital care in Buncombe and Madison Counties. The “tied” markets are both acute inpatient hospital services and outpatient medical services at Defendants’ five Outlying Facilities.

207. As a direct and proximate result of Defendants’ Asheville/Outlying Facilities Tying Scheme, a substantial amount of competition is foreclosed.

208. On information and belief, for each of the Outlying Facilities, Defendants in their negotiations with commercial health plans generally condition the inclusion of Mission Hospital-Asheville’s acute inpatient hospital services on those insurers also offering both inpatient and outpatient services at the Outlying Facilities. Defendants generally insist on the Outlying Facilities’ inclusion even if insurers would otherwise choose to put a different, competing hospital in network, or even if insurers would not otherwise be willing to pay the allowed amounts Defendants insist on for inpatient and outpatient care at the Outlying Facilities.

209. One example of how the Asheville/Outlying Facilities Tying Scheme works in practice is Defendants’ hospital in McDowell County, Mission Hospital-McDowell. It is located at 430 Rankin Drive, Marion, NC 28752, about 45 minutes driving time to the east of Asheville.

210. Mission Hospital McDowell has significant market power, but not monopoly power, in its region.²³ Data reflects the following approximate market shares in the three most proximate zip codes: in zip code 28752, 37.4%; in code 28761, 36.1%; and in code 28762, 35.3%.

211. A rival hospital, Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge Morganton, is located less than 30 minutes away to the east of Mission Hospital-McDowell. It is located at 2201 S Sterling St, Morganton NC 28655.

212. Mission Hospital-McDowell has approximately 30 beds. Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge Morganton has approximately 184 beds. Mission Hospital-McDowell and Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge Morganton are competitors.

213. Cost data available in a large commercial dataset for Mission Hospital-McDowell reflects that for a variety of procedures where there is a significant volume of those procedures for each year, such as CT scans, Mission Hospital-McDowell is not only consistently one of the most expensive in the State but is more than triple the average cost for some routine procedures.

214. For example, available price data reflects that the average allowed amount for a CT scan of the abdomen and pelvis (CPT 74176) is about \$2,000 at Mission Hospital-McDowell, whereas the average in the State is just under \$500. This divergence is particularly stark because it is unable to be explained by a quality difference, as CT scans are relatively standard. Instead, the cost differences are explained by contract negotiations between insurers and hospitals.

215. When the COPA was in effect, Mission Hospital-McDowell was well below the State average with respect to prices for outpatient care. Today, Mission Hospital-McDowell charges approximately 50% above the State average for outpatient care—corresponding with the period in which HCA/Mission were free to engage in unregulated price increases and

²³ But the combination of Mission McDowell and Mission Asheville might be enough to exceed 60 to 70% market share, which may be viewed as a monopoly share. See allegations at paragraph 225 below.

anticompetitive contracting practices. Using an overall analysis of outpatient procedure costs, Mission Hospital-McDowell has gone from being less expensive than 60% of facilities in the State for outpatient medical service in 2016 to among the top 3% most expensive facilities in the entire State now. This dramatic pricing shift coincides with the removal of COPA regulations in late 2016 that prevented excessive price increases or abusive contracting practices.

216. Mission Hospital-McDowell is not only significantly more expensive than the State average for outpatient care—it is also significantly costlier than its only significant competitor, Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge Morganton, which is less than a 30-minute drive away. Moreover, on information and belief, commercial health plans do not consider either hospital to be of significantly higher quality than the other, particularly for “plausibly undifferentiated procedures” such as a CT scan.

217. In a competitive market, commercial health plans would encourage members to seek lower cost care just minutes away. However, on information and belief, because of the Asheville/Outlying Facility Tying Scheme, Defendants have foreclosed real competition on price or quality in other markets that appear competitive on paper. Furthermore, on information and belief, Defendants use contracting provisions to prevent commercial health plans from fully informing consumers of price differences or from directing consumers to the lower cost option. Defendants are thereby using, or leveraging, their monopoly market power over acute inpatient hospital services in the Asheville Region to anticompetitive effect in the Marion NC-area market.

218. Mission has similarly used its monopoly dominance in inpatient acute care at Mission Hospital-Asheville in Buncombe and Madison County to attempt to monopolize several outlying inpatient and outpatient markets where its other small regional hospitals are located,

namely, Angel Medical Center and Highlands-Cashiers Hospital (Macon County), Blue Ridge Regional Hospital (Mitchell County), and Transylvania Regional Hospital (Transylvania County).

219. For example, according to the Medicare Hospital Market Service Area File for 2019 for inpatient origin, HCA has an 85.3% market share in zip code 28712 in Brevard, NC, the top inpatient zip code for HCA's Transylvania Regional Hospital in Brevard, Transylvania County. This total HCA market share comes from Transylvania Regional Hospital's 44.8% market share in the zip code and Mission Hospital-Asheville's 40.5% market share in the zip code. Pardee UNC Hospital only holds 10.4% market share, despite being about half the driving distance from Brevard and substantially lower cost than Mission Hospital-Asheville. This monopolization cannot be explained in a competitive market without tying and/or contracting provisions that prevent insurers from encouraging members to seek care at a closer and lower cost facility.

220. In total, HCA/Mission controls over 75% of the inpatient market share in Transylvania County and charges significantly higher prices than the closest non-HCA facilities.

221. Similarly, according to the Medicare Hospital Market Service Area File for 2019 for inpatient origin, HCA has a 92.4% market share in zip code 28741 in Highlands, NC, the top inpatient zip code for HCA's Highlands-Cashiers Hospital in Highlands, NC. This total HCA market share comes from Highland-Cashiers Hospital's 43.8% market share in the zip code and Mission Hospital-Asheville's 48.7% market share in the zip code. Northeast Georgia Medical Center only holds 7.6% market share, despite being closer driving distance from Highlands and substantially lower cost than Mission Hospital-Asheville.

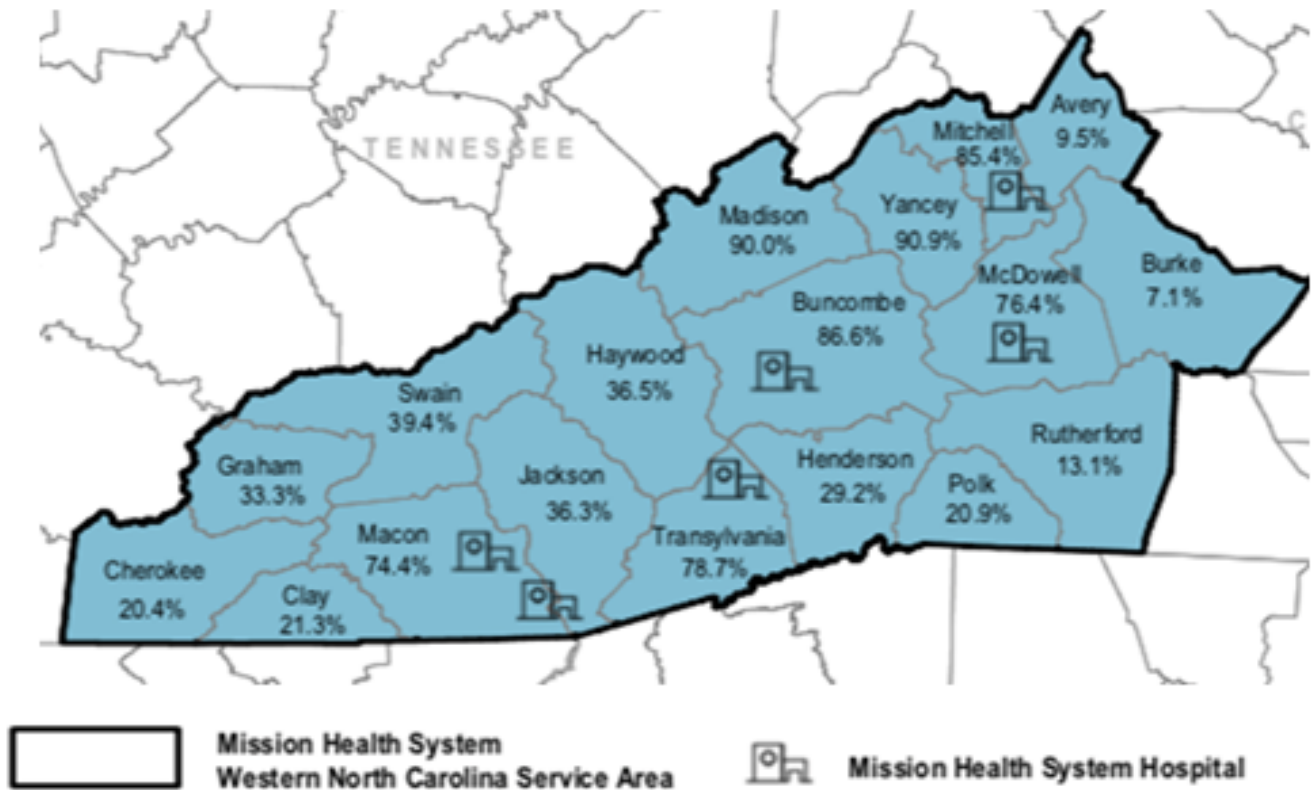
222. In total, HCA/Mission controls over 70% of the inpatient market share in Macon County despite charging significantly higher prices than the closest non-HCA facility. Similarly, this monopolization cannot be explained in a competitive market without tying and/or contracting

provisions that prevent insurers from encouraging members to seek care at a closer and lower cost facility, as discussed below.

223. Stated differently, at the time of the 1995 COPA, Mission only had a monopoly in the Buncombe and Madison County markets.

224. By contrast, the HCA system in North Carolina now has a monopoly (above 70%) market share both in Buncombe and Madison Counties, as well as in other Counties:

Mission Health Inpatient Market Share, 2018



225. Now, because of the combined market power of the facilities it acquired in the asset purchase from the former Mission system, HCA has a market share in the range which may be considered monopoly market power (above 60 to 70%), in seven different counties:

- Yancey – 90.9%

- Madison -- 90%
- Buncombe -- 86.6%
- Mitchell – 85.4%
- Transylvania -- 78.7%
- McDowell -- 76.4%
- Macon -- 74.7%

3. *Use of anti-steering, anti-tiering contracting practices*

226. Steering arrangements are arrangements by which a commercial health plan is able to steer plan subscribers to a lower-cost rather than a higher-cost facility. Commercial health plans may seek to steer patients by including language in insurance plan documents encouraging subscribers to choose one facility rather than another or conditioning the selection of a higher-cost facility on a higher copay or deductible from the subscriber.

227. In addition, or alternatively, commercial health plans may seek to place providers in tiers, with the insurance plan subscriber being encouraged through a variety of means to choose the provider in the tier of better-value providers over a discouraged tier of more costly providers.

228. Steering is an important tool commercial health plans can use to control healthcare costs, particularly in consolidated markets. President Trump’s Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust criticized the type of contracting provisions and negotiating tactics HCA uses, saying, “Without these provisions, insurers could promote competition by ‘steering’ patients to medical providers that offer lower priced, but comparable or higher-quality services. Importantly, that practice benefits consumers, but the anti-steering restrictions prevented it.” Likewise, Senator Chuck Grassley, then chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee said the anti-steering practices of HCA and several other systems were, “restrictive contracts deliberately designed to prevent consumers’ access to quality, lower cost care.”

229. During the pertinent times, on information and belief, Defendants have required one or more insurers not to use steering or tiering language, or to use weaker language or provisions than the insurers would have desired to use, as a condition of obtaining access to Defendants' "must have" Mission Hospital-Asheville for their commercial health plans.

230. Investigative reporting has shown that HCA has a history of using anti-steering or similar contract language.

4. *Use of gag clauses and lack of transparency.*

231. For years, Defendants have obscured their price increases and anticompetitive contracts from regulators and the public through use of gag clauses that prevent insurers from revealing their agreements' terms. The effect of this gag clause language is anticompetitive as it prevents competitors, insurers, and consumers from understanding in a transparent manner the pricing and other terms and arrangements being used by Defendants.

232. Moreover, HCA has continued to refuse to release the prices it charges for these and other procedures in a fully transparent manner despite a recent change in federal law requiring it to do so. Effective January 1, 2021, a new federal regulation required the public disclosure of certain aspects of HCA's negotiated price terms in agreements with private insurance companies. *See* 45 C.F.R. § 180.50. HCA has however failed to fully disclose this information in a timely, complete, and understandable manner.

233. By violating this price disclosure regulation, and by including gag clauses in HCA/Mission's provider agreements with insurers, Defendants have kept community members, regulators, and the general public from learning of the grossly inflated, monopolistic prices that are being charged.

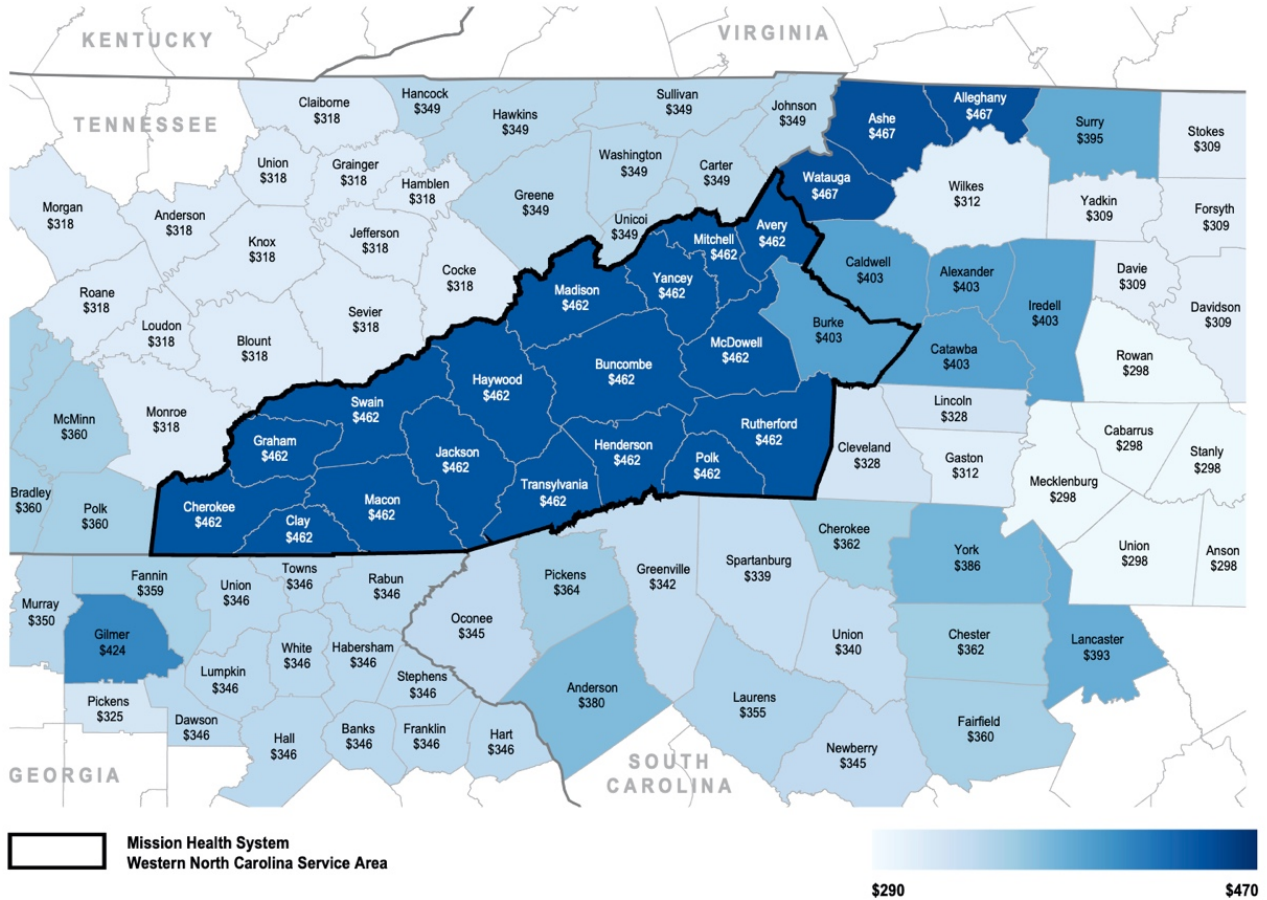
234. This rule was first created by the Trump Administration over the opposition of HCA’s lobbying and then proactively continued by the Biden Administration—signaling growing bipartisan consensus that the lack of price transparency with regard to hospital services leads to higher prices for consumers and employers.

D. Defendants’ unlawful course of conduct has led directly to substantially higher insurance premiums and other costs for Plaintiffs and the putative class

235. Insurance premiums in the counties where Mission operates are substantially higher than the state average and substantially higher than areas with higher costs of living. For example, individual insurance premiums are now approximately 50% higher in Mission’s self-defined service area than Winston-Salem; about 55% higher in Mission’s service area than Durham, Raleigh, or Charlotte; and about 60% higher than Greensboro.

236. Mission’s anticompetitive impact on prices is perhaps most obvious for an individual who simply moved across a county line outside of Mission’s 18 county service area. For example, crossing the county line from Rutherford County (in Mission’s self-defined service area) to Cleveland County (outside of Mission’s service area), an individual would see premiums ***drop immediately by 29%***. Similarly, driving East from Cherokee County or South from Macon County (in Mission’s self-defined service area) into Tennessee or Georgia, an individual would see an immediate premium decline of over 20% as visualized below:

**KFF Lowest Cost Plan in the County for 40-Year-Old Male
2020**



237. These dramatic differences can be primarily attributed to market power, according to academic studies. For example, a Harvard University analysis found that, “Variation in spending in the commercial insurance market is due mainly to differences in price markups by providers rather than to differences in the utilization of health care services . . . 70 percent of variation in total commercial spending is attributable to price markups, most likely reflecting the varying market power of providers.” And the US government’s official guide to shopping for individual health insurance indicates that “differences in competition” are one of the primary sources of variation in premiums.

238. During the pertinent times, Defendants' anticompetitive practices have allowed them to charge of supracompetitive prices to commercial health plans and TPA payers.

239. When private insurance and TPA payers have been obligated to pay these supracompetitive prices to Defendants, the payers in turn have passed the prices along to their insurance plan subscriber base.

240. Patients also are directly harmed by Defendants' supracompetitive prices through direct payments made by patients to Defendants, in the form of copays, coinsurance payments, and deductibles. These direct payments are often calculated as a percentage of the allowed amount for which the patient is responsible for, so when allowed amounts reach supracompetitive levels, as they have at HCA/Mission, patients who must go to Defendants' system for care suffer direct financial injury.

241. As a result of Defendants' supracompetitive prices, and the pass-through by insurance and TPA payers of the amounts at issue, ordinary insurance and healthcare consumers have been injured by having to pay higher premiums, copays, coinsurance payments, and deductibles.

E. Antitrust Injury

242. As a result of the Defendants' monopoly power, monopolization and attempted monopolization, and the anticompetitive practices Defendants have used to increase negotiated prices with insurers and self-funded TPAs, reduce provider competition, and reduce quality of services, patients such as Plaintiffs and other putative class members throughout Western North Carolina have paid within the last four years, and continue today to pay higher prices for health insurance coverage (including premiums, employee contributions, copays, deductibles and out-of-pocket payments) and pay higher coinsurance payments directly to Defendants for services than

they otherwise would, while receiving lower quality care than they would in a competitive market. In addition, Defendants' conduct has caused injury to competition for the reasons stated herein.

F. Additional facts regarding the named Plaintiffs

1. *William Davis*

243. William Alan Davis is a citizen and resident of North Carolina with a residence address in Clyde, North Carolina, Haywood County. Mr. Davis resides to the west of Candler. In the last several years, Mr. Davis received medical care from Timothy Plaut, M.D. in Candler. Dr. Plaut worked for Mission MyCare Plus in Candler.

244. After HCA bought the Mission system, HCA announced that it was shutting down the Candler primary care practice. Mr. Davis learned from Dr. Plaut about the shutdown. Pursuant to a news article dated February 23, 2021,²⁴ Dr. Plaut was described as stating that he was shocked to learn that the clinic and job he loved would be gone in just 45 days. He stated that “[i]t created a lot of hardship for our patients.” Dr. Plaut estimated that more than 7,000 patients total, many without insurance, were treated at the two clinics. “Our practice in Candler was one of the original safety nets through Mission and we took care of a lot of Medicaid and Medicare; we had homeless folks and severe mental illness.”

245. Recently, when Mr. Davis visited his father at the hospital in Asheville, he noted that the hospital environment and his father's room was dirty. Mr. Davis and his wife noticed there was a trash can which had not been emptied. When Mr. Davis' father was in the hospital, it appeared that the nurses who took care of him for the most part were all “travelling nurses,”

²⁴ Karen Zatkulak, Clinics closed, dozens of doctors leave Mission Health since HCA takeover, Feb. 23, 2021, <https://wlos.com/news/local/clinics-closed-dozens-of-doctors-leave-mission-health-since-hca-takeover> (accessed June 28, 2021).

including his main nurse and the phlebotomist who treated him. There appeared to be a shortage of certified nurse assistants and unit coordinators.

246. When Mr. Davis himself was a Mission Hospital patient, he went to the emergency room. It was his impression that one or more unnecessary tests were ordered.

247. Mr. Davis also received care at Mission WorkWell, located in Asheville, NC, including in the time period from 2018 onward.

248. During the relevant period, Plaintiff paid premiums in order to be enrolled as a plan member in the respective health plans. As a result of HCA's anticompetitive conduct, he, and each other Plaintiff described below, within the last four years paid artificially high premiums, co-payments, deductibles, co-insurance payments, and/or out-of-pocket payments not covered by the health plans.

2. *Richard Nash*

249. Richard Nash is a citizen and resident of North Carolina with a residence address in Candler, North Carolina, Buncombe County. Mr. Nash was born in 1960.

250. Mr. Nash has health insurance with Blue Cross through his wife's employment which she has held for over 25 years.

251. Mr. Nash worked in construction for years and later worked in a plant. Mr. Nash was injured on the job several years ago and has significant medical issues. During his time working in the construction industry, Mr. Nash helped during the construction of the cardiology ward at the Mission Asheville hospital during the time period of approximately 1991 until 1995.

252. In 2017, while covered by his insurance with Blue Cross, Mr. Nash was scheduled to receive cataract surgery in both eyes. He was scheduled to receive the cataract surgery from a physician he was assured was very renowned. Then, Mission allowed its contract with Blue Cross

to expire due to a dispute over Mission's demand to increase the amount the insurance company, and by extension its policyholders, would have to pay. When Mission fell out of the Blue Cross network, Mr. Nash had to cancel his surgery. He subsequently had to reschedule the procedure through a different facility.

253. During the relevant period, Plaintiff paid premiums in order to be enrolled as a plan member in the health plan. As a result of HCA's anticompetitive conduct, he paid additional amounts similar to the other Plaintiffs.

3. *Will Overfelt*

254. Will Overfelt is a citizen and resident of Asheville, NC. Mr. Overfelt has lived in the Asheville area for approximately 20 years.

255. In February 2020, Mr. Overfelt's father was ill. He was sent to the Mission Hospital Asheville emergency room by his primary care physician and was found to have advanced cancer.

256. Mr. Overfelt's father was admitted to Mission Hospital Asheville for approximately one week. During that time, Mr. Overfelt and his mother frequently visited Mr. Overfelt's father and noticed that the conditions at the hospital were deteriorated compared to how they had been in years past when family members had gone to the hospital.

257. Mr. Overfelt noticed that the rooms were dirty. It was hard to get information. He had trouble getting his father his pain medications timely.

258. He would push the call button and an excessive amount of time would lapse before someone would come to his father's room. The quality of care was clearly worse than it had been in years past.

259. Mr. Overfelt recalls early on, he saw a napkin on the floor in his father's hospital room. He left it where it was, wondering if any cleaning was really being done. The napkin was still there on the floor a week later when his father was discharged.

260. There were delays in getting help so his father could go to the bathroom. There were delays in obtaining water and various other items of sustenance and comfort. His father apparently was never bathed while there.

261. His father was discharged to go to a nursing home/rehabilitation facility, where he passed away approximately three days thereafter from his cancer. The date of death was February 18, 2020.

262. Mr. Overfelt applied for an insurance policy under the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") in December 2020. He was approved for a policy through Blue Cross. The health policy coverage began on January 1, 2021.

263. Since that time, Mr. Overfelt has paid a premium of approximately \$168 per month. He believes the total premium cost is approximately \$480 / month but that part of it is covered by a subsidy component of the Act.

264. During the relevant period, Plaintiff paid premiums in order to be enrolled as a plan member in the health plan. As a result of HCA's anticompetitive conduct, he paid additional amounts similar to the other Plaintiffs.

4. *Jonathan Powell*

265. Jonathan Walton Powell is a citizen and resident of North Carolina who resides at 2960 Henderson Mill Rd, Morganton, NC 28655, in Burke County.

266. Mr. Powell has been employed as a machinist for a local company and has worked at that company for approximately 28 years. He has been and continues to be a very good worker

at his job. In fact, his father worked in the same building that he works in today for many years. Mr. Powell grew up in Burke County and most of his family continues to reside there.

267. Mr. Powell has been fortunate to be insured through his employer with group health insurance. His insurance is with Blue Cross Blue Shield and he has had that insurance for over the last 20 years.

268. For the last several years, Mr. Powell has had the need to seek medical care. His primary care physician had always been associated with Mission Hospital and as a result, when he has begun ill and needed additional care and testing, his primary care physician has sent him to the Mission facilities. Mr. Powell had great confidence in his primary care physician as he had taken very good care of Mr. Powell for over the last ten years.

269. Unfortunately, after the sale of Mission Hospital and the other Mission facilities, his physician spoke to him about his inability to continue Mr. Powell's care. He was told by his physician that the new owner, HCA, overloaded him with so many patients, he could not continue to provide the proper care for them and he had had enough. He shared with Mr. Powell that he was going to work for another hospital. Since this past March, 2021, Mr. Powell's former physician has provided medical care for others in an adjoining town.

270. Mr. Powell believes that if HCA had not purchased Mission, his care would have continued to be provided by the physician who was most knowledgeable about him and his condition and who had treated him for years.

271. Since March, 2021, the former medical office that he went to in Morganton, which was called Mission Community Medicine, Burke, was completely closed down by HCA.

272. Because he lost his physician and the practice was closed, Mr. Powell is now being treated at Mission Health, Nebo Family Medicine, Nebo, N.C. He is being cared for by a

Physician's Assistant and he still has not had another physician assigned to him since his primary care physician left.

273. Mr. Powell has been recently treated at Mission Hospital in Asheville, having last been seen there on June 10, 2021, where he remained for over two hours.

274. Mr. Powell has been seen a number of times at the Urgent Care Office at Mission McDowell Hospital. Numerous tests have been ordered on his behalf. He is scheduled for an appointment at Mission McDowell Hospital this month on August 17, 2021.

275. Mr. Powell has lung problems and his pulmonologist at Asheville Pulmonology, a clinic also associated with Mission Hospital, sends him to Mission McDowell Hospital, which is closer than Mission Hospital, Asheville, for his CT scans.

276. During the pertinent times, Mr. Powell has received medical care both from HCA-Mission facilities related to the Mission McDowell Hospital in Marion, NC, as well as from facilities related to the Mission Asheville Hospital. Mr. Powell believes that while there is another community hospital, Grace Hospital, in his county, he is being referred to the Mission hospitals because his physicians are affiliated with those hospitals.

277. Mr. Powell has continued to and plans to continue to receive care from and including at My Care Now-McDowell, 472 Rankin Drive, Marion NC 28752; from Mission Hospital, Memorial Campus, 509 Biltmore Avenue, Asheville NC 28801; at Mission McDowell Hospital, 430 Rankin Dr, Marion, NC 28752; and at Asheville Pulmonary & Critical Care Associates, P.A., 30 Choctaw Street, Asheville NC 28801 who are affiliated with Mission Asheville Hospital.

278. As a result of HCA's anticompetitive conduct, Mr. Powell paid additional amounts similar to the other Plaintiffs.

5. Faith C. Cook, Psy.D

279. Faith C. Cook, Psy.D. is a citizen and resident of North Carolina who resides in Black Mountain, North Carolina, Buncombe County.

280. Dr. Cook is a Clinical Psychologist who received her Doctorate from the University of Hartford and her Bachelor's Degree from the University of Georgia. She practices with Sylva Clinical Psychology in Sylva NC.

281. Dr. Cook has health insurance through a Blue Cross policy under the Affordable Care Act.

282. As a dedicated health care provider, Dr. Cook has a great interest in ensuring that her patients and others have access to very good and reasonably priced health care. She has concerns regarding the Mission monopoly and the resulting increasing costs since HCA took over Mission while simultaneously the quality of the patient care has been significantly deteriorating.

283. During the pertinent times, Dr. Cook has excessive amounts as a proximate result of Defendants charging supra-competitive prices for healthcare, similar to the other Plaintiffs.

6. Katherine Button

284. Ms. Button is the executive chef and in a leadership role with a restaurant group. The restaurant group has a self-insured plan through Roundstone.

285. During the pertinent times, Ms. Button and her family have had insurance through a self-funded plan which includes Mission hospital in the plan. She and her family have received medical care through Mission, including from Mission Hospital-Asheville.

286. One reason why her business switched over to a self-funded format was due to the crushing costs of regular health insurance in the Asheville area, due to HCA/Mission. However,

even with self-funding, the costs are still high. The self-funded administrator, Roundstone, has advised that the reason why the costs are so high in the Asheville region is due to HCA/Mission.

287. During the pertinent times, Ms. Button has paid excessive amounts as a proximate result of Defendants charging supra-competitive prices for healthcare, similar to the other Plaintiffs.

VII. CLASS ALLEGATIONS

A. Class definition

288. Plaintiffs define the putative class in this litigation as follows:

Any individual or entity in the Relevant Region who is a North Carolina resident and who, during all or part of the period beginning August 10, 2017 to the present, with regard to Defendants' acute care hospital services or ancillary products, paid some portion of premiums, deductibles, copays or coinsurance for a self-insured or fully-insured product offered by or administered by Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, BMS TPA, Cigna, Coventry, CWI Benefits, Crescent TPA, Humana, Healthgram TPA, Key Benefits Administrators TPA, MedCost, MedCost Ultra, MultiPlan PHCS, United Healthcare, Wellpath, and Western North Carolina Healthcare Coalition.²⁵

289. The "Relevant Region" in this case is the 18 Counties that comprise Defendants' total service area: Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania and Yancey. This is identical to the 17-County western North Carolina geographic market known as Rating Area 1 under the Affordable Care Act, except that Burke County is added.

290. Excluded from the class are the Presiding Judge, employees of this Court, and any appellate judges exercising jurisdiction over these claims as well as employees of that appellate court(s).

291. This class definition is subject to revision or amendment as the matter proceeds.

²⁵ This class definition with regard to identities of insurers and TPAs relies on public information from Defendants. Plaintiffs reserve the right to modify or amend this definition as they receive additional information.

B. Rule 23 requirements

292. This action is suitable for resolution on a class-wide basis under the requirements of North Carolina Rule of Civil Procedure 23.

293. Numerosity: The class is composed of hundreds and thousands of class members, the joinder of whom in one action is impractical. The class is ascertainable and identifiable from Defendants' records and documents.²⁶

294. Commonality: Questions of law and fact common to the class exist as to all members of the class and predominate over any questions affecting only individual members of the class. These common issues include, but are not limited to:

- a. Whether Defendants have a monopoly in a defined product market in Buncombe County;
- b. Whether Defendants have a monopoly in a defined product market in Madison County;
- c. Whether Defendants have a monopoly in a defined product market in the Counties of Yancey; Mitchell; Transylvania; McDowell; and/or Macon.
- d. Whether Defendants, including Mission, and HCA, whether either or both have acted willfully or otherwise unlawfully to acquiring or maintaining their monopoly or attempting to do so;
- e. Whether Defendants have used their market power and anticompetitive means to impose prices far above those that would be charged in a competitive market, causing harm to Plaintiffs and others;
- f. Whether Defendants have engaged in improper tying practices with regard to their provider agreements with insurance companies and TPAs;
- g. Whether Defendants have engaged in improper anticompetitive practices with regard to the terms and provisions that they have required to be included in their payer/provider agreements;

²⁶ Populations per US Census information for the 18 Counties include: Avery (17,506), Buncombe (256,886), Burke (89,968), Cherokee (27,969), Clay (10,946), Graham (8,509), Haywood (61,053), Henderson (114,913), Jackson (42,938), Macon (34,813), Madison (21,499), McDowell (45,227), Mitchell (15,004), Polk (20,557), Rutherford (66,599), Swain (14,260), Transylvania (33,775) and Yancey (17,760).

- h. Whether Defendants have willfully abused their monopoly power by reducing output and quality, including by reducing budgets and staffing at facilities;
- i. Whether Defendants' conduct has violated the North Carolina State Constitution's prohibition on monopolies;
- j. Whether Defendants' conduct has violated N.C.G.S. § 75-1 *et seq.*;
- k. Whether Defendants COPA immunity defense at most only applies to some period of time for Buncombe County and Madison County, and does not apply to a monopoly during some or all of the pertinent times in the Counties of Yancey; Mitchell; Transylvania; McDowell; or Macon;
- l. Whether Defendants COPA immunity defense does not even apply for Buncombe or Madison Counties, due to regulatory evasion;
- m. Whether Defendants' breaches of state law caused antitrust injury to the Plaintiffs and class members, injured competition and/or injured consumer welfare; and
- n. Whether the Plaintiffs and the class members are entitled to an award of compensatory damages and/or injunctive, declaratory or equitable relief.

295. Typicality: Plaintiffs' claims are typical of the claims of the other class members.

Plaintiffs and the other class members have been injured by the same wrongful practices. Plaintiffs' claims arise from the same practices and course of conduct that give rise to the other class members' claims and are based on the same legal theories.

296. Adequate Representation: Plaintiffs will fully and adequately assert and protect the interests of the other class members. Plaintiffs have retained class counsel who are experienced and qualified in prosecuting class action cases. Neither Plaintiffs nor their attorneys have any interests conflicting with class members' interests.

297. Predominance and Superiority: This class action is appropriate for certification because questions of law and fact common to the members of the class predominate over questions affecting only individual members, and a class action is superior to other available methods for the fair and efficient adjudication of this controversy, since individual joinder of all members of the

class is impracticable. Should individuals be required to bring separate actions, courts would be confronted with a multiplicity of lawsuits burdening the court system while also creating the risk of inconsistent rulings and contradictory judgments. This class action presents fewer management difficulties while providing unitary adjudication, economies of scale and comprehensive supervision by a single Court.

298. Injunctive, Declaratory, Equitable Relief: The prosecution of the claims of the putative class in part for injunctive relief, declaratory or equitable relief, is appropriate because Defendants have acted, or refused to act, on grounds generally applicable to the putative class, thereby making appropriate final injunctive relief, or corresponding declaratory relief, for the putative class as a whole.

VIII. CLAIMS FOR RELIEF

COUNT ONE MONOPOLIZATION IN VIOLATION OF STATE ANTITRUST LAW (N.C. Const. Art. 1 § 34; N.C.G.S. § 75-1 *et seq.*)

299. The above-alleged paragraphs 1 through 299 are incorporated by reference.

300. Article 1, Section 34 of the North Carolina State Constitution states: “Perpetuities and monopolies are contrary to the genius of a free state and shall not be allowed.”

301. N.C.G.S. § 75-2.1, entitled, “Monopolizing and attempting to monopolize prohibited,” provides: “It is unlawful for any person, to monopolize, or attempt to monopolize, or combine or conspire with any other person or persons to monopolize, any part of trade or commerce in the State of North Carolina.”

302. N.C.G.S. § 75-8, entitled, “Continuous violations separate offenses,” provides: “Where the things prohibited in this Chapter are continuous, then in such event, after the first

violation of any of the provisions hereof, each week that the violation of such provision shall continue shall be a separate offense.”

303. N.C.G.S. § 75-16, entitled, “Civil action by person injured; treble damages,” states: “If any person shall be injured or the business of any person, firm or corporation shall be broken up, destroyed or injured by reason of any act or thing done by any other person, firm or corporation in violation of the provisions of this Chapter, such person, firm or corporation so injured shall have a right of action on account of such injury done, and if damages are assessed in such case judgment shall be rendered in favor of the plaintiff and against the defendant for treble the amount fixed by the verdict.”

304. N.C.G.S. § 75-16.1, entitled, “Attorney fee,” provides, in pertinent part: “In any suit instituted by a person who alleges that the defendant violated G.S. 75-1.1, the presiding judge may, in his discretion, allow a reasonable attorney fee to the duly licensed attorney representing the prevailing party, such attorney fee to be taxed as a part of the court costs and payable by the losing party, upon a finding by the presiding judge that: (1) The party charged with the violation has willfully engaged in the act or practice, and there was an unwarranted refusal by such party to fully resolve the matter which constitutes the basis of such suit....”

305. Defendants have monopolized, and continue to monopolize, the relevant market alleged herein in violation of Article I, Section 34 of the North Carolina Constitution and North Carolina General Statutes Section 75-2.1.

306. During the pertinent times including the last four years, Defendants possessed monopoly power in the relevant market.

307. During the pertinent times, including after the 2016 repeal of the COPA but prior to its 2019 asset sale to HCA, Mission possessed monopoly power in the relevant market. From

August 10, 2017 onward, Mission possessed an approximate 80 to 90% market share in Buncombe and Madison Counties. Mission's market power was durable rather than fleeting and included the ability to raise prices profitability above those that would be charged in a competitive market.

308. During the pertinent times, including after the asset sale from Mission, HCA possessed monopoly power in the relevant market. From 2019 onward, HCA has possessed an approximate 90% market share in Buncombe and Madison Counties. HCA's market power was durable rather than fleeting and included the ability to raise prices profitability above those that would be charged in a competitive market.

309. During the pertinent times including the last four years, Defendants engaged in the willful acquisition or maintenance of that power as distinguished from growth or development as a consequence of a superior product, business acumen, or historic accident; and, Defendants accompanied their possession of monopoly power with an element of anticompetitive conduct.

310. Regardless of whether Mission unlawfully acquired a monopoly in light of the COPA, during the pertinent times, including after the COPA was repealed in September 2016, Mission unlawfully maintained a monopoly.

311. Mission engaged in continuing violations within the meaning of N.C.G.S. § 75-8 while under the COPA and after the COPA was repealed in 2016.

312. From January 2019 forward, HCA has unlawfully created and maintained a monopoly.

313. During the pertinent times, Defendants have engaged in the willful creation or maintenance of their monopoly power.

314. In addition to or in the alternative to the above-stated monopolization claim, the Plaintiffs also allege, as actionable monopolization: A relevant market in this case is the product market for general acute care (GAC) inpatient hospital services in the Outlying Regions in Western North Carolina where Defendants operate the Outlying Facilities. (“Outlying Regions Inpatient Services-Only Market”).

315. The relevant product in this market—acute inpatient hospital services—is defined the same as for Asheville Region Inpatient Services market, Asheville Region.

316. HCA today owns and controls monopoly market shares for inpatient care in seven counties in Western North Carolina. In the Outlying Regions Inpatient Services-Only Market, HCA has monopoly market power in the Counties of Yancey – 90.9%; Madison -- 90%; Buncombe -- 86.6%; Mitchell – 85.4%; Transylvania -- 78.7%; McDowell -- 76.4%; and Macon -- 74.7%.

317. The geographic market for present purposes is defined as the Outlying Regions in which or near where Defendants’ Outlying Facilities operate.

318. At the time of the performance of the COPA from 1995 to 2016, the State reasonably relied on Mission’s representations that Mission had monopoly market power in Buncombe and Madison Counties only. The scope of the COPA did not authorize monopolies in any other Counties including in the Outlying Regions.

319. The COPA did not authorize Mission (or HCA) to monopolize the Outlying Regions.

320. Defendants have unlawfully monopolized the Outlying Regions.

321. Defendants have willfully created or maintained a monopoly with regard to the Outlying Regions Inpatient Services-Only Market.

322. Defendants' conduct has had an anticompetitive effect including by acquiring and closing down competitors. All five of the Outlying Facilities now in HCA's Outlying Regions counties once were owned by other owners who were actual or potential competitors of HCA Mission Hospital-Asheville.

323. Wherefore, Plaintiffs and class members are entitled to an award of classwide damages in excess of \$25,000; and are entitled to award of reasonable costs and attorney's fees to the extent allowable by law.

COUNT TWO
ATTEMPTED MONOPOLIZATION

324. The above-alleged paragraphs 1 through 323 are incorporated by reference.

325. N.C.G.S. § 75-2.1, entitled, "Monopolizing and attempting to monopolize prohibited," provides, in pertinent part: "It is unlawful for any person to ... attempt to monopolize ... any part of trade or commerce in the State of North Carolina."

326. During the pertinent times, including within the last four years, Defendants possessed monopoly power in markets including, but not limited to, the Buncombe and Madison County market.

327. During the pertinent times, Defendants engaged in the willful and unlawful attempt to obtain, create, maintain or expand their monopoly power.

328. During the pertinent times, Defendants attempted to acquire, maintain, or expand their monopoly through illegitimate means.

329. During the pertinent times, Defendants had a specific intent to monopolize a relevant market, including by attempting to monopolize the Asheville Region Outpatient Services Market; the Outlying Regions Inpatient and Outpatient Services Market; and/or the Outlying Regions Inpatient Services-Only Market.

330. During the pertinent times, Defendants engaged in predatory or anticompetitive acts, as more specifically alleged above.

331. Absent Court intervention, due to the Defendants' actions, there is a dangerous probability of successful monopolization, specifically in the Asheville Region as to Asheville Region Outpatient Services; and in the Outlying Regions as to Outlying Regions Inpatient and Outpatient Services.

332. Wherefore, Plaintiffs and class members are entitled to an award of classwide damages in excess of \$25,000; and are entitled to award of reasonable costs and attorney's fees to the extent allowable by law.

COUNT THREE
RESTRAINT OF TRADE IN VIOLATION OF STATE ANTITRUST LAW
(N.C.G.S. § 75-1 *et seq.*)

333. The above-alleged paragraphs 1 through 332 are incorporated by reference.

334. N.C.G.S. § 75-1, entitled, "Combinations in restraint of trade illegal," states: "Every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy in restraint of trade or commerce in the State of North Carolina is hereby declared to be illegal. Every person or corporation who shall make any such contract expressly or shall knowingly be a party thereto by implication, or who shall engage in any such combination or conspiracy shall be guilty of a Class H felony."

335. N.C.G.S. § 75-2, entitled, "Any restraint in violation of common law included," states: "Any act, contract, combination in the form of trust, or conspiracy in restraint of trade or commerce which violates the principles of the common law is hereby declared to be in violation of G.S. 75-1."

336. During the pertinent times, Defendants have engaged in the use of contracts and agreements in restraint of trade as alleged hereinabove. Defendants have negotiated and enforced contracts containing anticompetitive provisions restrictions with insurers or TPAs which are contracts, combinations, and conspiracies within the meaning of North Carolina General Statutes Sections 75-1 and 75-2.

337. The challenged contractual restrictions unreasonably restrain trade in violation of North Carolina General Statutes Sections 75-1.1 and 75-2.

338. Wherefore, Plaintiffs and class members are entitled to an award of classwide damages in excess of \$25,000; and are entitled to award of reasonable costs and attorney's fees to the extent allowable by law.

COUNT FOUR
INJUNCTIVE, EQUITABLE, DECLARATORY RELIEF

339. The above-alleged paragraphs 1 through 338 are incorporated by reference.

340. The Court has authority to award declaratory, injunctive or equitable relief under the Declaratory Judgment Act, which states at N.C.G.S. § 1-253: "Courts of record within their respective jurisdictions shall have power to declare rights, status, and other legal relations, whether or not further relief is or could be claimed. No action or proceeding shall be open to objection on the ground that a declaratory judgment or decree is prayed for. The declaration may be either affirmative or negative in form and effect; and such declarations shall have the force and effect of a final judgment or decree."

341. Further, under G.S. § 1-254: "Any person interested under a deed, will, written contract or other writings constituting a contract, or whose rights, status or other legal relations are affected by a statute, municipal ordinance, contract or franchise, may have determined any question of construction or validity arising under the instrument, statute, ordinance, contract, or

franchise, and obtain a declaration of rights, status, or other legal relations thereunder. A contract may be construed either before or after there has been a breach thereof.”

342. Plaintiffs show that to the extent the facts and law allow for the imposition of equitable, declaratory or injunctive remedies, they plead recourse to any and all such remedies.

343. Plaintiffs request that the Court order the reformation of Defendants’ practices, and/or contractual and agreement terms, including, for example, to require greater pricing transparency, express language against use of “all or nothing” arrangements, express provisions committing not to use anti-tiering or anti-steering provisions, and other such remedies.

344. Plaintiffs in addition to their damages claims, request injunctive, declaratory or equitable relief and show that the injunctive relief will prevent Defendants from imposing anticompetitive all-or-nothing, anti-tiering, and anti-transparency provisions in their contracts, thus allowing health plans to steer patients away from lower value providers.

345. Plaintiffs and the Class members have standing to and do seek equitable relief against Defendants, including an injunction to prohibit Defendants’ illegal conduct as well as an order of equitable restitution and disgorgement of the monetary gains that Defendants obtained from their unfair competition.

IX. JURY DEMAND

346. Plaintiffs demand a trial by jury.

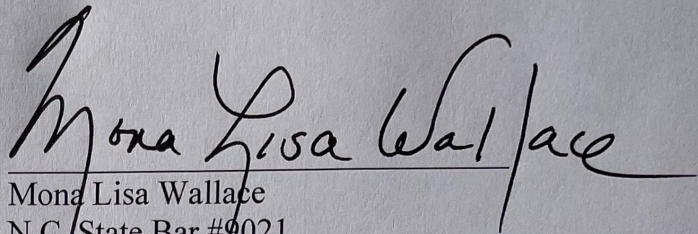
X. PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, Plaintiffs pray that this Court enter judgment on their behalf and that of the proposed class and adjudge and decree as follows:

- A. certifying the proposed class, designating the named Plaintiffs as class representatives and the undersigned counsel as class counsel, and allowing the Plaintiffs and the class to have trial by jury;

- B. finding that Defendants have monopolized, and continue to monopolize, the relevant market alleged herein in violation of Article I, Section 34 of the North Carolina Constitution and North Carolina General Statutes Section 75-2.1, and that Plaintiffs and the members of the class have been damaged and injured in their business and property as a result of this violation;
- C. finding that Defendants have engaged in a trust, contract, combination, or conspiracy in violation of North Carolina General States Sections 75-1 and 75-2, and that Plaintiffs and the members of the class have been damaged and injured in their business and property as a result of this violation;
- D. ordering that Plaintiffs and members of the class recover threefold the damages determined to have been sustained by them as a result of Defendants' misconduct complained of herein, and that judgment be entered against Defendants for the amount so determined;
- E. entering judgment against Defendants and in favor of Plaintiffs and the class awarding restitution and disgorgement of ill-gotten gains to the extent such an equitable remedy may be allowed by law;
- F. awarding reasonable attorney's fees, costs, expenses, prejudgment and post-judgment interest, to the extent allowable by law;
- G. awarding equitable, injunctive and declaratory relief, including but not limited to declaring Defendants' misconduct unlawful and enjoining Defendants, their officers, directors, agents, employees, and successors, and all other persons acting or claiming to act on their behalf, directly or indirectly, from seeking, agreeing to, or enforcing any provision in any agreement that prohibits or restricts competition in the manner as alleged hereinabove; and
- H. awarding such other and further relief as the Court may deem just and proper.

Dated: August 10, 2021.



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