# Kentucky Health News

# Chain that robbed Fulton of its hospital continues to abandon small towns, says it’s no longer a rural hospital company

by Al Cross

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In politics, if you want to know where things are coming from and where they are headed, one maxim is to “follow the money.” That could apply to the evolution of what used to be a rural hospital chain, **Community Health Systems**of Cool Springs, Tenn., near Dyersburg.

“The company has been selling off or closing poorly performing rural hospitals for the last several years,” [reports](https://www.nashvillepublicradio.org/post/troubled-tennessee-hospital-chain-says-it-s-way-out-rural-areas#stream/0) Blake Farmer of **Nashville Public Radio**. “The selling spree is primarily meant to pay down the company’s outsized debt load left over from when Community Health was growing as fast as it could. But the hospital chain was also strategically pulling out of small towns.”

Farmer adds, “CEO Wayne Smith told investors gathered at this week’s annual [J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference](https://www.businessinsider.com/jpmorgan-healthcare-conference-buzz-2019-1) in San Francisco that it’s almost entirely left communities with fewer than 50,000 people — once its calling card compared to competing hospital chains.” Smith said [during a presentation](https://chsnet.gcs-web.com/static-files/879bc30e-8822-4356-8088-1bd65ad5a7a5), “We’re no longer a non-urban — or for some of you all, a rural — hospital company.”

CHS has 111 hospitals in 20 states. In once owned Parkway Regional Hospital in Fulton, Ky., but closed it in 2015, steering business to a hospital it owned in nearby Martin, Tenn. Kentucky had expanded the Medicaid program, which helped rural hospitals, and Tennessee has not, but much of the now-closed hospital’s service area was in Tennessee.

“Public officials from Fulton County wanted to take over the hospital and find other providers who might continue services in the area, but CHS rejected this offer, likely, to pre-empt competition for patients in the county,” [said a study](https://kyhealthnews.blogspot.com/2016/07/study-fulton-hospital-closed-partly.html) by the **Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured** and the **Urban Institute**. “Further, CHS placed restrictions on the use of the hospital – namely, it permitted no acute-care facility to operate there, an action that one respondent said ‘strangled’ the community’s access to local health care services.”