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LAS VEGAS UPDATE

Officials get behind wellness tourism initiative

By JoAnna Haugen

While gambling, dining and shopping are popular reasons for visiting Las Vegas, several organizations have partnered to bolster the city's reputation as a legitimate destination for medical and wellness tourism.

In July 2014, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA), the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance, Las Vegas Heals and the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) developed a strategic plan for medical and wellness tourism. It outlined several existing features—dozens of spas, ample hotel rooms for patients—that, when combined with plentiful, state-of-the-art medical facilities and a solid foundation of knowledgeable professionals, could turn the city into a sought-out destination for those seeking medical care and/or interested in a healthy lifestyle.

Las Vegas is already a center of excellence for some forms of medical care. The Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, for example, is one of the premier locations for diagnosis and treatment of patients with cognitive disorders. Nonetheless, many of the city's top-tier doctors are already overworked, said Douglas Geinzer, CEO for Las Vegas Heals ("Heals" is an acronym for Health Education Advocacy and Leadership of Southern Nevada).

Since the deployment of the city's strategic plan, one of the medical-specific focuses has been on building a larger workforce with an infrastructure married to the hospitality mindset. In May, the Nevada Legislature approved full funding of the UNLV School of Medicine for the next two-year budget, and the school is on track to welcome students in the fall of 2017. Roseman University, a private, nonprofit institution, plans to open its first medical school in two years, as well.

In addition to university programs, there has been increased development of medical facilities in the Las Vegas Valley. St. Rose Dominican Hospital will introduce a 96-room expansion in the fall to host more patients. Additionally, the first phase of Union Village, an integrated health village with a hospital complex featuring myriad coordinated medical services, a hotel and on-site entertainment, is expected to open in Henderson in the fall of 2016. "You can come to Vegas and

Union Village, and have all your physicians, the hotel, retail, food service and entertainment options right there in one location," said Craig Johnson, co-founder of the complex. He said he is also hopeful that the Union Village campus will help attract doctors, especially as they leave local universities.

While Las Vegas Heals and sim-

ilar partners focus specifically on medical tourism, the LVCVA has been placing much of its emphasis on business and leisure travelers by bringing more health and wellness meetings and events to the city and promoting existing wellness travel features such as spas and outdoor and natural spaces and activities.

Many of Las Vegas' wellness facilities have been in existence for some time, such as the 45 resort-model spas on the Strip. A number of properties also encourage healthy hospitality, including the MGM Grand's 171 Stay Well rooms and suites, which feature in-room wellness amenities and technology. An increasing num-

ber of restaurants are offering vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free and other similar healthy meal options, as well.

"We're creating awareness around the world that these additional services, choices and travel options exist here," said Cheryl Smith, medical and wellness tourism manager at the LVCVA.

Though there is no specific campaign designed to promote Las Vegas as a medical and wellness tourism destination, Smith said LVCVA representatives are talking more about this aspect of the city at trade shows, especially as it relates to people's everyday lives.

"It's not something that is necessarily an option for people, so when they travel, they start to look for things that fit into their lifestyle," she said.



MGM Grand's Stay Well units feature wellness amenities and technology.

The long-term vision for all of these components—infrastructure and support for more health care staff and facilities, active promotion of spa and wellness services, the recruitment of more medical and health conventions and conferences and the orchestration of all of these people and services—is designed to come full circle many years down the road.

"This isn't about throwing up a banner ad," Geinzer said. "We're doing this organically."

Emphasizing aspects of wellness travel is arguably easier than selling medical tourism; after all, most people don't think about medical travel until they are faced with a specific health care need. Nonetheless, both are poised to develop and grow together in Las Vegas in the years to come.

"Las Vegas is probably one of the best cities in the world positioned for this because of our history," Smith said. "We're a city that was built to attract visitors; we were built for travel. The fact that our medical community has grown up alongside our tourism industry is a great thing."

"All the reasons that make Las Vegas a great destination for business and leisure travel are actually all the same reasons that make it a great destination for wellness travel and, eventually, medical travel, as well."

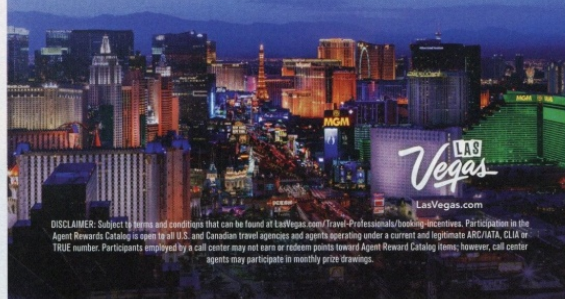
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A rendering of Union Village, which is expected to open in Henderson in 2016.