



## Executive Suite: Thomas M. Hopkins, Garden City

By: Christine Giordano

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Thomas M. Hopkins has seen some major changes in his five-year tenure as executive director of EPIC Long Island, a nonprofit that helps people with disabilities, mental illnesses and epilepsy. EPIC is buying a new, larger property for its headquarters in East Meadow, and plans to hire about 35 more people.

The organization, founded in 1953 as the Epilepsy Foundation of Long Island, recently changed its name to EPIC (Extraordinary People in Care) to reach a broader population of people living with disabilities. Its mental health clinic, group homes, community education programs and day services serve thousands of people on Long Island, said Hopkins, 62, and with changes in health care laws, many more may soon have access to its services. EPIC hosts a fundraising walk Oct. 26 and a dinner dance Nov. 8.

### **What's your advice to other executives about working with a board?**

Working with a board of directors is like having a series of individual relationships. Before having a conversation with the board as a group, you have to have a lot of individual conversations based on people's expertise, concerns, what you know about them, what they know about you, the trust level. You've got to spend a lot of time getting to know your board, letting them get to know who you are.

### **Who will you be looking to hire?**

More clinicians to work in the clinic because there will be much more space and we'll be seeing more patients. We're looking to open two more group homes over the next year and so we will need staff [for those]. And we'll probably need more support staff in our business office or HR department to account for the additional staff.

### **Are you aligning yourself with other services?**

We're involved right now in merger talks with a mental health clinic here in Nassau County. The alignment will make us both more viable. We want to plan ahead so that we don't just survive, we thrive over the next five, 10, 15, 20 years. We have to be flexible and economize where we can.

### **Regarding people with epilepsy, is there a growing population on Long Island?**

Yes. One in 26 people will have epilepsy at some point in their lives. I think epilepsy tends to be under-recorded because for a lot of people there's a certain stigma.

### **Is it politically incorrect to use the term epileptic?**

Yes; it's just people with epilepsy.

### **What's your philosophy for a good board and staff relationship?**

The board does a really good job of not micromanaging. I'd like to think that I help them not to micromanage by not overwhelming them with needless details. I need to bring issues to them with enough information for them to make them a decision . . . The staff fulfill a couple of different roles. One is they act as kind of the organizers of committees, (such as finance, programs, and planning committees. I'm able to trust my staff enough to meet with board members and communicate effectively with them and share information with them . . . what I try to avoid here is something called The Moses Model, where the director is Moses and you got the Board up on the mountaintop and the staff down in the valley. And the only connection between the Board and the staff is Moses going back and forth with the Commandments. I mean that just doesn't work.

**What are your biggest challenges?**

A lot of not for profits, most of us, have seen not for profit donations reduced over the years. But more than that, financial support from the government -- federal, state, and local level -- has dropped dramatically over the years and is continuing to drop. In Nassau County the funding mechanisms for mental health clinics has changed over the last few years and it's happening to managed care right now. A couple of agencies have gone out of business.

**How does the new health care law affect you?**

We'll eventually see some additional costs to us for people whom we don't provide health care benefits to now but we will be in the future. But more than that, I can see the positive: People who might have deferred looking for counseling, might look for services because they will have health care. They'll be in a position to look for services from an agency like ours.

**CORPORATE SNAPSHOT**

**NAME:** Thomas M. Hopkins, executive director, EPIC Long Island (also doing business as The Epilepsy Foundation of Long Island) in Garden City

**WHAT IT DOES:** Provides services to people with epilepsy, developmental disabilities and mental illness to increase their life satisfaction. We provide what people need, whether that be help with taking a shower, with round-the-clock supervised care, with assistance in dealing with anxiety or depression, or with education on dealing effectively with epilepsy.

**EMPLOYEES:** 150 full time, 140 on Long Island; 151 part time, 120 on Long Island

**2012 REVENUE:** \$20.9 million