

# Dental clinic to give residents new reason to smile

By JOSH KOVNER  
Courant Staff Writer

**NEW BRITAIN** — The Community Health Center dug in on the front lines of neighborhood medicine last July and quickly spotted a shortage: affordable dental care for low-income and uninsured residents.

"Patients would say, 'We're so glad you're here; where's the dentist?'" said Director Robin Sharp.

So the center, which runs a large medical clinic at Washington and Fayette streets, has set out to fill a gap.

Lacking the money to start a dental clinic with a sliding fee scale on its own, the center recently won approval to do it with the aid of public money by documenting the

shortage to the federal government. The center has applied to the State Bond Commission for \$400,000 to turn an adjoining building it owns, known as One Washington Square, into a dental office with up to eight treatment rooms.

The center plans to seek additional public and private money to hire up to three full-time dentists and a staff of dental hygienists and assistants.

"We surveyed all the dentists in New Britain and found that few are seeing people without insurance, or [people] on Medicaid and Medicare," said Sharp.

As a consequence, "a lot of people are putting off dental care as

long as possible, until they're in pain and it becomes an emergency situation," she said.

The Community Health Center runs medical and dental clinics in Middletown, Meriden, New London and Old Saybrook.

Craig McDonald, head of dental services for the health center, said he expects the New Britain clinic to be as lively as the center's oldest dental office in Middletown, which serves a wide range of Middlesex County residents.

Among its patrons are low-income families, elderly people on fixed incomes, workers with no insurance, people with disabilities, Wesleyan students and faculty, and others who can afford to go elsewhere, but don't.

"We've had people who've lost a job and needed the sliding fee scale," said McDonald. "Some have stayed even though they've gotten another job with private insurance because we're their neighborhood dentist."

The fee scale slides all the way from the prevailing rate to a 75 percent discount, based on income.

"Everyone is eligible for the sliding fee. A larger family could realize savings even if they have insurance," said McDonald, a clinic dentist for 17 years. He's based at the Middletown office. The health center's dental staff members are a mix of young practitioners just out of residency programs and dentists with years of experience. McDonald said many private den-

tists don't take patients on Medicaid, the federal health-insurance plan for low-income people, largely because the reimbursement rate is low. Dentists are also afraid the large influx of Medicaid patients could overburden their practice.

"For a \$100 service, they get about \$30 from Medicaid. A clinic can do it because we qualify for public and private grants and donations to cover costs," said McDonald.

Sharp said she's eager to bring a dental clinic to New Britain. For thousands of people have sought treatment at the health center's medical clinic since it opened 11 months ago. She estimated that at least 10 percent of the center's medical patients would visit the dental clinic

1875