

# CHC celebrates 25 years of affordable health care

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**MIDDLETOWN** — The Community Health Center, located at 636 Main St., will be kicking off a yearlong anniversary celebration. May 1 marked the beginning of CHC's 25th year providing affordable, comprehensive health care to the underserved.

Today the center exemplifies 25 years of continuous growth, standing as the largest health care provider of primary services for the uninsured in the state of Connecticut. CHC serves over 27,000 people in six facilities statewide: Groton, New London, Middletown, Meriden, Old Saybrook and New Britain. Mark Masselli, president/chief executive officer of the organization, said.

CHC offers medical, dental, mental health care and social services. Fostering a holistic approach to health care, CHC provides maternal and infant care through its prenatal program, AIDS outreach programs, parent-aid assistance and various educational seminars for the community. The center operates New Horizons, Shelter for Battered Women and the Homeroom afterschool program.

According to Masselli, the center prides itself on sponsoring its 6-year-old north end Luis Lopez Herb Garden. What was once a vacant lot littered with garbage, broken bottles and the occasional hypodermic needle is now a formal garden complete with fountain and park benches, due to the efforts of community volunteer action.

The center may have started on a shoestring budget, but 25 years have seen it thrive.

Concerned that the city's low-income, uninsured residents could not afford medical care, Masselli and a few community-minded volunteers rolled up their sleeves, giving time and hard work to form the needed Community Health Center in 1972.

The center's meager beginnings started without any local, state or federal grants. Masselli said, "I took \$40 out of my pocket and incorporated the center ... and we just plodded right in."

In a 115 College St. house, two second-floor bedrooms and a kitchen were converted into a makeshift dental clinic. Two local dentists and various Wesleyan University students volunteered a few hours each week and a physician from New

York City traveled to Middletown once a month.

Lillian Reba Moses, a revered CHC board member and volunteer after whom the Child Guidance Center is named, said of Masselli: "I didn't know much about him at the time; he had one chair, dental floss and toothbrushes he was handing out to people — poor people in the community ... he was 18 or 19 at the time."

"The center has grown into a large and strong agency with excellent doctors caring for people who can't afford medical care," Moses said.

Jerry Weitzman, owner of Pelton's Drug Store, said, "One lazy day in the late 1960s, two long-haired young men marched into the store to buy armloads of supplies for their dental clinic. They asked me to come take a look at their new set-up ... the next thing I knew I was chairing their board."

Weitzman has been chair of CHC's board of directors for more than 15 years, and a 25-year active member. The CHC Weitzman Dental Clinic is dedicated to his volunteer efforts over the years.

"Over the years CHC went from a counter culture, volunteer organization to a mainstream agency with paid staff and comprehensive services," Weitzman said. CHC moved to its current Main Street location a year after opening and continued expanding from there.

Weitzman added, "The most exciting thing for me is to meet someone on the street and have them say 'I went to the health center and they took really good care of me,' simple things like that are the most rewarding."

"CHC's mandate is to treat people with dignity; services rendered are first class. People get warm, hospitable care," Weitzman said.

"There is really no difference between us and a private practitioner," Masselli said of the center's state-of-the-art facilities.

This anniversary year involves more than a celebration of CHC's successes, such as establishing branch facilities in six cities and offering expanded comprehensive services.

Masselli said the health center is celebrating the longevity of its driving mission: to advocate health care as a right and not a privilege, deliver health care services in a manner maintaining a



From left to right are Mark Masselli, president and CEO of the Community Health Center, Lillian Reba Moses, board member emeritus of CHC and Gerard Weitzman, all three are the founders of the health center.

person's dignity and respect, and serving as an organizing vehicle in which individuals can participate in the delivery of their own health care.

Twenty-five years later the Community Health Center still operates under the same cornerstone philosophy.

Masselli said, "I'm proud of what we've accomplished ... I attribute it to collective volunteer effort. We have to open our eyes to the needs of the community — working together we can make a difference."

The health center has always included patient advocates on its board, for direct community input in the decision-making process impacting services offered to residents.

Key to CHC's celebration is a summer concert

series to be held in the North End featuring Pandemonium (a Wesleyan band), Blues Express (performing Zydeco), UHF and Orchestra Exclusiva (August).

The celebration is set to begin for of May, however no formal dates have been set. Other projects in the works are a moving volunteerism, a Memorial Day and the development of a speakers bureau and the development of a speakers bureau.

CHC is introducing its on-line Internet site: [www.CHC1.com](http://www.CHC1.com).

The health center is taking pride in 25 years of hard work and dedicated community.