

# Health center celebrates eight years

By PENNY RIORDAN  
Staff Writer

NEW BRITAIN — As the Community Health Center celebrated eight years of offering health services to the community with words of congratulations from local and state elected officials Monday, the center also used the day to do what it has always done, reach out to the community.

The center, located at the corner of Lafayette and Washington streets, is strategically located to serve New Britain's neediest residents, 7,000 of whom rely on it as their primary source of health care.

Monday the parking lot was turned into a festival, complete with balloons, face painting and a visit from Rocky, the New Britain Rock Cats' mascot, for the Back-to-School Health Fair. Parents were signing children up for physicals and children were receiving free dental screenings and cleanings.

Mayor Timothy Stewart and a representative from the office of U.S. Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-5th District, praised the center for its work to serve the uninsured and underinsured in New Britain and the surrounding towns.

"I applaud you guys for all the work you put in for people who would normally go without health care," Stewart said.

In the eight years the center has been open here, it has almost been in a constant state of expansion, adding dental

and mental-health care and providing care in the school system.

A school-based community health center has been open at New Britain High School for at least four years and the center would like to expand those services to the middle schools.

With each expansion and addition to services, the goal is always the same, said president and CEO Mark Masselli, to provide everyone in the city the best health care possible.

"Health care is still a very competitive environment," he said. "But here in New Britain, the center has had its own very organic growth, based on the needs of the community."

Masselli said when the center first started, the staff knocked on 6,000 doors in the city to personally invite residents to use the center.

"We recognize that the population we serve is really a kind of group that needs to be invited," he said.

With support from Johnson's office, the center has applied for a \$650,000 federal grant to expand services into the city's three middle schools, a move that has been received with suspicion by some members of the Board of Education.

Masselli insists that training parents and children in good health habits really should start at the middle-school age.

"Middle schools are critical," he said. "Once you get kids into a good pattern of health care, they'll attend school more regularly and be more likely to suc-

ceed."

The center has also embarked on a landmark program called Access to Care, with a \$2 million grant over three years from the federal government to better coordinate services a patient using the center might need, Masselli said.

For instance, an employee would work with patients to help them find a primary-care provider or assist them with clothing or housing needs as well.

So far, with the three employees working under the

grant, the center receives roughly 40 new patients a week.

The program is still developing, but Masselli said it has met its goal of better coordinating the many agencies and organizations in New Britain that serve the lower-income community.

"We just have to work on better educating the board on the services we provide," he said.

*Penny Riordan can be reached at priordan@newbristainherald.com, or by calling (860) 225-4601, ext. 221.*



Dental hygienist Jennifer Oakley gives Jose Javier Camacho, 3, his first tooth-cleaning Monday at the New Britain Community Health Center. Jose's brother, Omar Toro, 12, sits nearby for moral support. The center conducted a health fair Monday, offering free dental screenings and cleanings, check-ups and registration for back-to-school physical examinations.

HERALD PHOTO -- LAUREN TAGLIATELA