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Courtney: Health center addition means more care

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

Congressman helps break ground for NL expansion

New London - Two major initiatives of the Obama administration converged on a corner lot off Howard Street Wednesday, when a few shovelfuls of dirt were thrown to officially break ground for an addition to the Community Health Center.

About \$900,000 in federal Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds will pay for the 3,700 square feet of new space, and 35 construction workers are being employed in the project. By expanding the health center so that it can house more doctors and nurses who can treat more patients, said U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, one of the goals of the Affordable Care Act - to make medical care more available and affordable to more people - is also being met.

"A lot of people think the recovery act is about projects like roads and bridges," Courtney said during brief remarks before donning a hard hat to shovel dirt at the site, which is on the south side of the current health center in the Shaw's Cove complex. "But \$2 billion went to community health centers, along with health IT investments. Community health centers, we know, are the most efficient use of health care dollars." Increasing the capacity of the nation's 1,000 community health centers, which provide mainly low-income patients with preventive and primary care and other health services, will help answer the need for more health care providers as demand increases when more people are insured through the health reform act, Courtney and other speakers said.

"Health care reform is really about health care access for more people," said state Sen. Andrea Stillman, D-Waterford.

The groundbreaking was timed to coincide with National Health Center Week. The New London center also marked the week Wednesday with a health fair, where patients could get free oral cancer screenings and learn about nutrition and general health topics, among other activities.

"This is a small ceremony today, but with a lot of meaning for us," said Alejandro Melendez Cooper, executive director of the New London center.

Margaret Flinter, vice president and clinical director of the parent organization for the New London center and its 11 affiliates around the state, said the additional space will include labs, exam rooms, behavioral health areas and pods where doctors, nurses and counselors can meet to coordinate a patient's care. It will enable the center to add 2,400 new patients to its current roster of 16,800, she said. The center is looking to hire two new primary care doctors or nurse practitioners, two medical assistants, a registered nurse, a behaviorist and a receptionist for the addition, she said.

This is the first addition to the center since it moved to Shaw's Cove in 1992 from cramped, older facilities in the city's Richard R. Martin Social Services Center. Local architect Rick Gipstein, who oversaw the conversion of the Shaw's Cove office building into medical offices, will also be the architect for the addition. Construction crews have already begun working, he said. Completion is slated for the end of the year.

Mayor Rob Pero noted that this year for the first time in 15 years, the City Council approved an appropriation to the health center, of \$10,000.

"Because you serve so many of our people, we are your partners," he said.

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