

The Wichita Eagle

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Rites mark beginning of clinic's expansion

■ Ground-blessing ceremonies by Native Americans were among the diverse cultural rituals performed at the Hunter Health Clinic.

BY KAREN SHIDELER
The Wichita Eagle

With burning sage and incense, clerical collars and embroidered silks, Hunter Health Clinic took the first step in its expansion project with a ground-blessing ceremony Friday.

The ceremony reflected Hunter's heritage as an American Indian health center, beginning with a blessing by Native American spiritual leaders.

And it reflected Hunter's diverse patient population, with chanting by Buddhist monks, dances by Hindu and Buddhist women, prayers by Protestant ministers and songs by Native Americans and a Bahá'í.

The ceremony is the beginning of a \$5.5 million building project that will triple the medical center's space. Ground for the new building is to be broken in late summer, with completion about two years away.

The new building will be just north of the existing one at 2318 E. Central. That 67-year-old building will be demolished and turned into a parking lot when the new one is finished.

The Native American spiritual leaders, representing the four compass points, gave thanks to "the Great Spirit, the Creator" as the ceremony began. Smoke from burning sage was offered to audience members, who drew it toward and over themselves with their hands. Drummers played songs honoring and thanking those who have passed on and those working at Hunter now.

"Different tribes have different ways," Cheyenne Nation priest



Jeff Tuttle/The Wichita Eagle

Sharmini Lawless performs a Hindu prayer dance Friday during the ground-blessing ceremony for the Hunter Health Clinic's new building.

American part of the ceremony drew to a close. He was referring to the Kumeyaay, Hunkpapa and Penobscot traditions that also had been used by the spiritual leaders, but could just as well have been referring to the other faith traditions that followed.

Hunter Health provides primary care to anyone and specializes in care for those who are unin-

an urban Indian health program.

In its most recent fiscal year, Hunter Health — a nonprofit community health center — had 51,721 patient visits, up from 35,311 five years earlier. That's about the maximum the existing building can accommodate.

The new building, designed by Law/Kingdon Inc., will have 45,000 square feet, with 10,000 of it unfinished space in the base-