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# State-of-the-art

## Statewide health center system leading way through technology

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Today

As patients walk into the Community Health Center in New Britain, they are greeted by an electronic kiosk, ready to scan a patient's license so they can quickly check in. Flat-screen TVs provide health tips.

Technology has changed the experience for medical practitioners too. They all carry laptops so they can easily access or input patient clinical data into an electronic medical records system. Video conferencing capabilities expand the training and consulting options available for staff.

Doctors don't have corner offices. Instead they share space in a unique pod system that puts physicians, nurses, and medical assistants in a single, open room to encourage better communication.



Community Health Center CEO Mark Masselli stands by a flat-screen TV, which provides video conferencing to the health network's various facilities. Masselli's organization, which serves the poor, is using technology to try to reinvent the delivery of primary care services.

And patients don't have to wait weeks or months for an appointment. Maybe a few days at most.

The Community Health Center, which has more than 200 locations and serves 130,000 patients in 13 cities across the state, may be one of the most cutting edge primary care practices in Connecticut.

But it's not because the center caters to a wealthy patient base. In fact, the organization primarily serves the uninsured or underinsured, which accounts for

90 percent of its patients.

CHC is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), which means as part of its funding it receives grants from the federal government to provide primary care, including medical, dental and behavioral health services, to people regardless of their ability to pay.



PABLO ROBLES

At the Community Health Center, patient check-in is done by computer.

Organizations like this are expected to take on a greater role in the health care system under federal health care reform, especially as insurance coverage is expanded to those who previously lacked it.

And that's great news to Mark Masselli, who founded CHC with a group of Wesleyan students and community activists in 1972 as a free clinic for the poor.

Now heading into its 40th year, the organization, which has its roots and main office in Middletown, has evolved into much more than a clinic, transforming itself into a breeding ground of health care experimentation and innovation.

“We are not just a health care company; we are a technology company as well,” said Masselli, who is president and CEO. “That is the thing people don’t understand in health care. You need to have the technical skills. The whole system is changing.”

Masselli himself is part activist, part health care aficionado and part chief executive officer. He has a vision for how the health care system — particularly primary care services — should transform itself. And he’s implementing that vision across the CHC network to build a statewide system that attempts to redefine primary care.



PABLO ROBLES

Mark Masselli shows off progress on a new center that is scheduled to open next spring on Main Street in Middletown.

Masselli has a business sense and is not afraid to use terms like “just-in-time,” supply, and demand and relate them

to making health care more efficient.

Masselli doesn't claim to have all the answers. In fact, he sees trial and error and implementing the best practices of top medical facilities from across the country as part of the process of trying to accomplish a system redesign.

"There have been a few teachable moments for us, where the risks we took got the best of us," Masselli admits. "But you can't have a culture that is afraid of failure."

CHC has gotten the attention of many leaders in the community.

"They are on the forefront of technology," said Larry McHugh, the president and CEO of the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce. "They are creating a model of health care delivery for the rest of the country."

Technology is the cornerstone of CHC's evolving practice.

The check-in digital kiosk is the latest gadget the health center has employed; it improves workflow in the waiting room. Next up is a voice recognition system to process patient calls.

Masselli said the organization was an early adopter of electronic medical records about six years ago and now all medical staff members carry laptops so they can quickly input clinical data. Paper records are extinct.

And all CHC sites are connected through a virtual cloud, so medical records can easily be transmitted from one location to the next. Patients can also access information from home.

A language line service provides over-the-phone interpreting in 130 different languages for patients who don't speak English. Video conferencing connects all CHC sites, which helps with training and meeting purposes.

CHC has also implemented an advanced access appointment scheduling system that has reduced patient wait times by closely analyzing and then matching supply — the number of available doctors — with demand — the number of patient appointment requests.

The system guarantees that patients will be seen "today, tomorrow, or the next day," Masselli said, allowing for a much quicker turnaround time. That's significant because it reduces patient no-shows, a factor in the length of wait for an appointment.

“It’s a whole philosophy of delivering care in a timely manner,” Masselli said

Beyond technology, the architectural layout of the medical office space is also unique.

In the newly renovated New Britain office, halls are designed to resemble more of a Park Avenue setting, rather than the crowded, dull space of a classic, old health center.

“Is that the right thing to spend money on?” Masselli asks. “We think so. We are trying to build brand loyalty and give people a peaceful feel. What the eye sees the heart feels.”

CHC has also implemented a pod system that ditches a physician’s corner office in favor of a community setting that places doctors, nurses and medical assistants in a single room. Each team member has their own cubicle and they are collectively responsible for a set of patients. They engage in daily “electronic huddles” to game plan the care they will provide patients for the day.

The purpose of the design, Masselli said, is to break down barriers of communication and ensure everyone is on the same page.

“We thought physicians might be the biggest resistors but they aren’t, they actually like it,” Masselli said. “Pods are really the vocal point in the transformation of primary care in how we organize the system.”

The technology and team-based approach allowed CHC to become recognized as a patient-centered medical home by the National Committee for Quality Assurance, the first FQHC in the state to receive that distinction.

CHC has been making significant capital investments in the past four years, spending \$25 million rebuilding centers in Stamford, Norwalk, Bristol, New Britain, Middletown, New London and Groton. A new facility will open in Waterbury in the coming months, as well as a new 50,000-square-foot center on Main Street in Middletown next spring.

Part of those investments were funded by about \$9 million from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, but at least half of the projects were self-funded or bank financed.

To be sure, not all Federally Qualified Health Centers are like CHC. In fact, few practices are keeping up with them.

Part of the technology advances are driven by the fact CHC gets funding from the federal government because it serves a poorer, often overlooked patient base. About 20 cents of every dollar CHC makes is from federal government grants. The federal health care reform law, if it stays intact, presents even more possibilities as it makes about \$10 billion available for FQHCs.

But Masselli said it's not the grants or government dollars that drive the innovation. It only helps fund it.

"It's our culture," Masselli said. "We are restless and we love playing in the sand box. We are dealing with a population that is abandoned, forgotten, and has no financial resources. Why not build them a world-class health care system?"