

New Waterbury health center offers care to all area residents

BY MARC SILVESTRI REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

The Community Health Center on North Elm Street in Waterbury. The health center has opened on North Elm St. in Waterbury. Steven Valenti Republican-American

WATERBURY -- It didn't take long for them to start showing up: the middle-aged man who'd been living in a lot of pain but hadn't seen a doctor for four years. The young, diabetic mother with her 4-week-old baby and 2-year-old toddler in tow.

Middletown-based Community Health Center Inc., a statewide private, nonprofit health organization, opened its new Waterbury health center at 51 North Elm St. on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.

CHC's newest health center offers primary medical care, behavioral health and dental hygiene services to all area residents, but with particular focus on the medically underserved — the poor, residents with no medical insurance or who are underinsured, and the non-English-speaking population.

Only about 7 percent of its patients statewide are covered by commercial insurance carriers, said Yvette Highsmith Francis, director of the new Waterbury site and several other CHC locations in central Connecticut. That means 93 percent of CHC's patients are either covered by public insurance, like Medicaid and Medicare, or are uninsured.

The new health center, which is open for new patients from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and is expected to begin offering Saturday hours this month, also provides a number of other health and wellness programs. Those include breast and cervical cancer early detection programs, smoking cessation programs and nutrition counseling.

"We like to think of ourselves as a 'one-stop shop' for all the medical, dental and behavioral health needs of our patients and their families," Francis said.

IN JUST ITS FIRST MONTH in the Brass City, the health center was visited more than 500 times by more than 250 patients, including that middle-aged man and the young mother, who were the first two people to walk through its doors shortly after they opened Nov. 22.

"We've very pleased with the response we've seen so far from the community," Francis said. "We feel we're on a pretty strong and consistent growth trajectory."

CHC has 13 primary health care centers across the state and delivers medical services from more than 200 total sites, including clinics and schools. In all, the organization receives about 400,000 patient visits per year from about 130,000 active patients, and employs more than 600 people.

Aside from Waterbury, its 12 other primary health care centers consist of large sites in Meriden, Middletown, New Britain and New London, and smaller locations in Bristol, Clinton, Danbury, Enfield, Groton, Norwalk, Old Saybrook and Stamford.

The organization was launched in 1972 when a group of community activists led by Mark Masselli, its founder and current president and CEO, opened a free dental clinic in downtown Middletown. Its founding principle was and continues to be that quality health care is a right, not a privilege.

CHC charges fees based on a three-tiered sliding scale that takes a patient's income and family size into consideration. It is also a Federally Qualified Health Center that receives federal funding and grants in return for its pledge to provide primary medical, dental and behavioral health services to the medically underserved, regardless of their ability to pay.

CHC began renovating the former Saint Mary's Family Health Center on North Elm Street in late July, according to Eliza A. Cole, CHC's media specialist. The price tag for the project was \$1.2 million.

When the dust cleared, the site had been converted into a 6,000-square-foot health center with nine state-of-the-art medical examination rooms, a behavioral health group room, and a dental hygiene room. There is also a Quest Diagnostics laboratory and service center on site.

The facility employs 14 people, including three primary care providers, two medical assistants, a dental hygienist, a psychologist and a psychiatric nurse practitioner, Cole said.

THOUGH A LARGE PERCENTAGE of its patients are either underinsured or have no insurance at all, it's a mistake to assume that the services, equipment and access to technology at any of CHC's health centers is anything but first rate, Francis said.

"When your focus is to provide medical services to the uninsured and underserved, people get this image of dirty, dark little clinics with sub-par equipment, broken windows, and holes in the floor," she said. "They assume that all of your supplies and equipment are second-rate and that your medical staff is made up of doctors who just aren't good enough to work anywhere else.

"Believe me," she said, "nothing could be further from the truth."

CHC's health centers are bright and clean and technologically sophisticated, Francis said. Their equipment is new and, in many cases, state-of-the-art, and their physicians, nurses and technicians are among the best you'll find anywhere, she said.

"This organization is intensely focused on being a world-class health care organization," she said.

The Waterbury location does appear to have embraced modern technology, which becomes apparent the moment you walk in. For instance, an electronic kiosk, enabling patients to confirm

appointments or update their personal information, greets anyone entering the main lobby. The center also has a large, fully appointed video conferencing center.

CHC was also among the first medical practices in the country to install an entirely electronic health-record system, making the flow of information among and between staff members -- each of whom carries a laptop or a tablet -- faster and more accurate and precise.

In addition, all CHC sites are linked by means of a virtual cloud that enables patient information and records to be easily, quickly and accurately transported from one to another.

Each examination room, meanwhile, is equipped with a dedicated telephonic language line giving the caregiver almost instant access to certified medical interpreters fluent in 170 languages and dialects, another technological innovation you don't see in every medical office. The service enables CHC staff to conduct an exam in the language of the patient.

"They are light-years ahead of most other organizations in terms of technology," said Larry McHugh, president and CEO of the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, who has known Masselli since the early '70s.

McHugh said the three things that make Community Health Center a special and successful organization are its willingness to embrace and incorporate new technologies into its business model; its ability to attract and maintain an "outstanding group of physicians" and a quality staff, and its ability to embrace and become an active and visible member of whatever community it enters.

"I think the people of Waterbury are going to look back very fondly on the day that this organization opened up a health center in their city and became a part of their community," he said.