

## Community Health Center has come long way in 40 years

Andrew Ragali | Posted: Thursday, May 3, 2012 7:29 pm

MERIDEN — In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a movement advocating free dental care encouraged three motivated Wesleyan University students to open their own dental care center in Middletown.

Matt Vinikas, John Hickenlooper and Mark Masselli decided the community needed more than just dental services though, so on May 1, 1972, Community Health Center Inc. opened its doors in Middletown. The primary health care center hasn't looked back since, expanding to 12 other communities — including Meriden — while serving 130,000 people annually across the state.

CHC is celebrating its 40th birthday this week, and has grown to become a staple of the community in Meriden since it arrived in the city in 1991.

“It's really about building community,” said Regional Director Yvette Highsmith-Francis, who has been with CHC for 18 years. “We do our best to try to be engaged in the community.”

CHC strives to make “quality, affordable primary care” available to the people of Meriden, Highsmith-Francis said.

It provides three health care services — medical, dental and behavioral — along with support services. Highsmith-Francis said medical education is part of what CHC provides to the community. One such educational program is “Food Smart and Fit,” which focuses on women dealing with obesity. The group meets once a week for eight weeks. Stress reduction and pain management classes are also offered.

The center is a hub for medical care,” Highsmith-Francis said. The Meriden facility served 13,000 patients last year, 95 percent of whom live in Meriden.

The 13 health centers in Connecticut are federally qualified. Highsmith-Francis explained that the federal government looks at a formula comparing the number of residents in a municipality against the number of medical centers. If residents are considered medically “underserved,” primary care facilities in the area can be designated federally qualified, a reimbursement designation by the Bureau of Primary Health Care.

“Meriden is clearly a medically underserved area,” Highsmith-Francis said.

Dr. Marwan Haddad, the clinical director for HIV, hepatitis C and buprenorphine Services, has been working at the Meriden center for more than five years.

“Every community needs something like this,” Haddad said. “We serve our community with what they need.”

He called CHC the model for primary health care.

Besides providing care at the Meriden facility, on State Street, CHC offers portable dental care at all public schools in the city, and a therapist at each school as well.

“It helps the family not have to take their child out of school,” Highsmith-Francis said.

The Meriden center is the first Community Health Center to have a private pharmacy connected — a Walgreens branch. All records are computerized, and have been since 2007, Highsmith-Francis said, so patients can visit their doctor and walk over to the pharmacy without worrying about a prescription being written out.

Quest Diagnostics, which performs lab work, is also partnered with CHC and allows patients to get all their lab work done in one place. Highsmith-Francis said Quest provides free lab work to patients who are 200 percent below the federal poverty level and don’t have insurance.

Also, the CHC sends a full medical team to homeless shelters in Meriden every week, allowing homeless people to receive treatment even if they are uncomfortable walking into the main facility.

“It removes barriers,” Highsmith-Francis said. “It helps break that cycle.”

For Haddad, CHC is second to none in terms of medical care and reaching out to the community.

“This is where I would come and get my care,” he said. “It’s really good medical care. We are meeting our community in terms of what their needs are.”

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