



New Heart of City center in Grand Rapids cares for mind and body

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By **Ted Roelofs | The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS — Bob Shearer could be a textbook case of why Heart of the City Health Center has come into being.

Shearer, 57, has fought a long battle with severe depression, for which he has been hospitalized three times in the past decade. But he also has diabetes and is prone to high blood pressure.

Thanks to the newly opened center, the Grand Rapids resident can get medical and mental health care under one roof.

“My blood pressure is under control because of this place,” Shearer said. “My diabetes is in check because of coming here.”

That’s the founding idea behind the \$30 million center, a collaboration of Cherry Street Health Services, Touchstone Innovare and Proaction Behavioral Health Alliance that opened this month.

Treating chronic mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression can be a challenge for low-income patients. Complicating things, they may be coupled with such physical ailments as asthma, heart disease and diabetes.

All too often, treatment for one is not coordinated with the other.

“We work to see that individual as a whole, not just from a mental health perspective,” said Jim Wood, a health



Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids Press

One-stop help: Ellen Mott of Wyoming and Bob Shearer of Grand Rapids are patients at the Heart of the City Health Center.

coach at the center.

"It's a new movement to see how we can give the best treatment."

As an example, Wood said a patient with a serious mental illness and untreated diabetes could naturally expect greater stress on their mental health. So, too, can a mentally ill patient with cardiovascular problems and trouble breathing.

"That's going to affect your mood," he said.

Wood joins other specialists including doctors, dentists, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, physical therapists and dietitians. The building at 100 Cherry St. SE replaces the cramped Grand Rapids Pediatrics and Ferguson Dental offices and houses all but one of the mental health and substance abuse programs offered by Touchstone.

Within a few years, the center expects to treat about 27,000 low-income individuals.

About 600 patients are to be enrolled in a pilot program based on an integrated care model for chronic illness, originally developed for medical conditions and general health care. Most have mental illness.

Chris Shea, executive director of Cherry Street Health Services, believes the center could become a national model for integrated care.

"The promise of this is that it can substantially reduce emergency room visits and inpatient care. It can significantly improve the overall health of the patient," he said.

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CHANGING OUR MINDS

Amid all the talk about health care, discussion of mental illness barely rises to a whisper. Yet in violence or in silent suffering, it often is a matter of life or death.

All this year, The Press will challenge stigmas and myths, bringing into focus people and their problems — and hope for those who suffer. We are committed to providing tools for readers to deal with their loved ones' problems. And telling your stories.

Today, we look at how our local mental health system — bolstered by a strong network of nonprofits — works amid the challenges and shortcomings of statewide care.

- **Complete coverage**