

Health & Medicine

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Lesloyd F. Alleyne Jr.
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Clean bill of health

Community Health Center Inc. celebrates its 35th anniversary of providing care to low-income patients

By Anne Pallivathukkal
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In 1972, six college students started a small health clinic staffed by volunteer physicians and dentists in a second-floor walk-up apartment near Wesleyan University in Middletown.

Today, that one health clinic has grown to almost a dozen located in towns all across the state, providing medical care to more than 70,000 low-income patients annually.

As Community Health Center Inc. celebrates its 35th anniversary this year, Mark Masselli, president and co-founder of CHC, reflected on the organization's early days.

"We were young and naive and thought, 'Do something good and people would open up their arms,'" Masselli says.

He says that it was not an easy task convincing health officials and the public about the virtues of their endeavor. Their slogan was "Health care is a right, not a privilege" and their goal was to provide health care for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

"They weren't ready for a different way to deliver care," Masselli says, and many people called it "socialized medicine."

In fact, the state Department of Public Health shut down their first facility for failing to meet one criterion — the width of the

apartment's hallway was one inch too narrow. Undeterred, Masselli and his group resumed their services at a new facility three blocks away at 635 Main St., where their headquarters is located to this day.

"When we opened, people opened their hearts and came to us," Masselli says as to why they persisted in their efforts, despite the initial obstacles. "They were excited and energized by what we were doing."

This October, the Mary Lou Strom Primary Care Center, a 5,000-square-foot facility at 5 North Main St. in the Thompsonville section of Enfield, became the latest CHC site to open its doors.

It is projected to serve 1,800 patients in its first year.

Masselli says that the new facility offers state-of-the-art technology such as electronic medical records, laproscopy — which allow physicians to send prescriptions directly to pharmacies — a language line allowing for the translation of 123 languages, and video conferencing capabilities.

Masselli says that the CHC sees a "broad swath" of patients coming through its doors, many of them the working poor and minorities.

"We see people in all walks of life," he says. "We're amazed about the need for health care."

Today, CHC is one of about 13 organizations in the state that provide primary medical — including treating chronic diseases — dental, and behavioral support care to patients who are often without insurance or under-insured.

In East Hartford, local volunteer health activists founded the East Hartford Community HealthCare Inc., at 94 Connecticut Blvd., in June 1996, according to Marjorie Berry, its chief executive officer.

The center now has a branch in Manchester, at 140 North Main St., and one in Vernon, at 3 Prospect St.

"It's growing by leaps and bounds," Berry says.

Like CHC and other medical centers, East Hartford Community HealthCare accepts most medical insurance providers, including Medicaid and Husky. Patients without insurance are charged on a sliding scale, according to their income.

"We see anyone that walks in our door, regardless of ability to pay," Berry says.

East Hartford Community HealthCare also provides in-school dental care to students in elementary schools in East Hartford and Manchester, as does CHC in Enfield.

Both are federally qualified health centers, signifying that they meet certain requirements, including a high standard of

clinical care.

For CHC, about 70 percent of its funds come from patient and insurance reimbursements, and 30 percent from federal and state grants, Masselli says.

Similarly, for East Hartford Community HealthCare, 75 percent of their funding is from patient and insurance reimbursements and 25 percent from state and federal grants, according to Berry.

The success of these organizations is not only because they provide high quality care at affordable rates, but also due to building partnerships with their patients and within the community, like with local chambers of commerce, health departments, and private providers.

Through a partnership with Walgreens, both organizations provide patients with discounted prescription drugs for the uninsured up to 50 percent off the regular price.

Both are also affiliated with area hospitals such as St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford.

Providing affordable, high-quality medical care is something that requires the efforts of an entire community, according to Masselli.

The CHC, East Hartford Community HealthCare, and other groups have come a long way in doing that, but, he says, "We did not get here on our own."