

Medical care for all



Dr. Gabriella Gellrich of Danbury's Community Health Center updates patients' electronic medical records on her laptop.

Community Health Center aids area's uninsured, under-insured

By Robert Miller
STAFF WRITER

Most people know enough to get medical help when they're sick. And they know where to get it — increasingly, they go to an emergency room. If they are poor, or under-insured, that often becomes the treatment center of choice, the place where people go first, not last.

Enter the Community Health Center Inc. of Danbury.

The center, which officially opened last week, is on Delay Street, across from the Danbury Ice Arena. Its basic premise is to give people comprehensive medical care before they get so sick they have to head to the ER.

"We're all about preventive care," said Adele Gordon, Community Health Care's Fairfield County director.

The center has a suite of offices and a team of health care professionals to help patients five days a week. It will offer, by appointment, care for chronic illnesses and urgent care for both children and adults.

It accepts all patients under HUSKY, SAGA, Medicaid and Medicare insurance plans, as well as those without insurance. It will charge those without insurance on a sliding scale, depending on income.

The clinic is opening in a city with established sources of medical care — Danbury Hospital, the hospital's Seifert & Ford Community Health Center on Main Street, the Hanahoe Clinic for children, the Wellness on Wheels van, and the AmeriCares Free Clinic.

But Karen Gottlieb, executive director of the AmeriCares Free Clinic program in Connecticut, said all these institutions can

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A lab area where tests are run or prepared to be sent out.



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Dr. Gabriella Gellrich

Doctor at new Community Health Center clinic



▷Health center opens in Danbury

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complement each other. For example, she said, AmeriCares offers free care to patients who have no health insurance or are under-insured.

In comparison, one of the groups the Community Health Center believes needs more and better care are families who qualify for Medicaid.

"Not that you can have enough good medical care, but Danbury is so lucky to have the programs it does," she said.

Community Health Care, based in Middletown, now runs 12 non-profit family clinics in the state, along with a host of school health and dental programs. Its motto is "Health Care is a right, not a privilege."

The group been studying the Danbury area for several years to see if the city had enough need to justify opening a clinic here. Once it decided to do so, it had to make the case to the federal government. Connecticut Health Care Inc. is a federally qualified health center, which means it has to meet a high standard of care and serve everyone in the city, regardless of the ability to pay.

"The need is very clear," Gordon said. "We had to prove it to the federal government and they agreed."

Once committed to the region, Community Health Care made contact with officials at City Hall, and in the business community. It also let city residents know.

"We knocked on 4,000 doors," said Mark Masselli, Community Health Care's president and chief executive officer. Currently, the center has a doctor, a nurse practitioner and a behavioral health specialist. But Masselli said that in the future, that staffing level could triple. He said the clinic will be open to everyone on the greater Danbury area.

"I can see us serving 8,000 to 10,000 patients," he said.

The clinic will offer patients some state-of-the-art amenities, including a completely electronic medical chart system. That's a much more efficient, less error-prone way of creating a medical record, eliminating the thick binders of paper that doctors usually keep on a patient, and allowing different members of the staff to view the chart and add information when needed.

"Let's take the technology and let it drive patient quality," said Margaret Flinter, vice president and clinical director of the state's Community Health Care Centers.

The clinic will have on-site laboratories. It will also have behavioral health staff there,



David W. Harple/Staff photographer

The new waiting room at Danbury's Community Health Center on Delay Street awaits patients.

working with the doctors and nurses, allowing for what Flinter calls a "warm hand-off" — an instance when a patient needs counseling, and the help is immediately available.

"Let's say the doctor notices Mrs. Smith is unusually anxious," Gordon, the Fairfield County director of Community Health Care said. "The doctor can ask 'Mrs. Smith, would you like to talk to someone,' and get her help immediately."

The clinic also will use a system to alert staff to check-ups the patients might need but aren't getting, such as mammograms, colonoscopies and Pap tests.

"No one wakes up in the morning and thinks 'Hey, I think I'll go get a colonoscopy,'" said Debra Freedman, one of the clinic's nurse practitioners.

It will also emphasize care for chronic problems, as well as urgent ones.

"If a patient is a diabetic, but comes in with bronchitis, we'll make sure the patient gets treated for diabetes," Flinter said.

The staff is committed to the concept of public health.

At a time when doctors coming out of medical school spurn primary care for higher-paying careers in orthopedics or anesthesiology, that commitment is increasingly rare.

"I've always worked in community health," said Dr. Gabriella Gellrich, one of the doctors working in the clinic. "People today who really need health care are struggling to get it. Working here, there's a sense of helping someone, of making a difference."

"I became a nurse practitioner

to serve the people who need health care," Freedman said. "It can be very challenging, because you're dealing with people who haven't had health care. But it can be very rewarding when you give them that access."

Gellrich said in such a setting, doctors gain immeasurably from their contact with a diverse mix of cultures. Gellrich was born in Brazil, and although she now speaks English, Spanish, French and German, she's lost her Portuguese.

"I'm hoping to get it back,"

she said. "I think I will in Danbury."

Freedman said in her student days, getting her nursing degree at Pace University, as well as her masters there, she got training at Danbury Hospital's women's health clinic and geriatric clinic.

"The community has a lot to teach us and we have a lot of things to offer," she said. "I'm glad I'm back."

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