

9/29/92  
The Day

# City about to turn over health clinic operations

## Private group hopes to expand medical services

By LYNN BONNER  
Day Staff Writer

**New London** — The city's medical and dental clinics will shift from public to private hands on Thursday, and the new operator, Community Health Center of Middletown, hopes to expand services and ask community members to become part of the decision-making process.

Maria Montanaro, director of the Community Health Center of New London — as the clinic has been renamed — has been working from its offices in the Richard R. Martin Center on Broad Street since

July, preparing for the transition. She met with community leaders, outreach workers, and community program directors over the summer in order to "get a picture of New London."

"Our philosophy is health care is a right, and if it is a right, access to health care should be equal for all people," she said. "People who come to our community-based health center should be receiving primary care services that are second to none in the area, and I think that that's what they receive. We want to speak to the dignity of our patients from the moment they walk in the door until the moment they leave."

The clinic offers a wide range of services, including full dental and medical care for all ages.

The city Health Department ran the clinic, called Expanded Health Services, since its creation in 1972. It was operated as a joint venture between the city and Lawrence &

Memorial Hospital since 1988, when a tight municipal budget threatened to close the clinic.

City officials approached Community Health Center more than a year ago about taking over the clinic, because as a federally qualified health center, it is eligible for grants for which the city and the hospital are not. Former City Manager C. Francis Driscoll was also concerned that the clinic would be vulnerable every year to closure because of the city's precarious fiscal position.

The city had been spending more than \$200,000 a year on the clinic. Under the new arrangement, the municipal share will be \$110,000 annually.

Community Health plans to immediately apply for a \$500,000 federal grant for new clinics, funding the city and the hospital were not eligible to receive.

See CLINICS page E8

#1424

# Clinics

From E1

Over time, it would like to find bigger offices, bring on more health care providers, increase dental services, where the demand is greater than the clinic can provide, and then offer care to non-residents, Ms. Montanaro said.

It's first priority, though, will be to meet the local need. There were 13,600 patient visits to the clinic in 1991, but a study done by Community Health shows that as many as 19,500 residents, largely poor and elderly, have no access to health care.

For Marijane Mitchell, the city's acting health director, the prospect

of opening the clinic to those outside the city is exciting.

"We keep getting calls from surrounding towns from people in desperate need of services. Up to this point, we've had to turn those people away. And it's hard to turn people away," Ms. Mitchell said.

"That will be a fine day for this region — when everyone can have access to primary health care."

L&M will continue to provide the medical staff and personnel, but one of the first additions the new managers will make is bringing on a social worker.

Many patients come to the clinics

with a variety of needs, "and it makes sense for us to have a worker available (who) can sit with patients and determine what their needs are, make referrals and provide the necessary follow-up," Ms. Montanaro said.

"Many times patients have health problems that are greatly impacted by their social situations. Unless they are able to solve some of the problems, they won't be able to improve their health status," Ms. Montanaro said.

"We see primary health care as a team function, with medical providers, social workers, health educators, community outreach workers, and administrators who are getting into the community and working with the community — all working together to meet the health care needs of the people. You can't just provide medical care in a vacuum," she said.

Community Health's mission is to remove the barriers to care, whether they result from inaccessibility, cultural differences, or finances, Ms. Montanaro said. The staff is bilingual.

The clinic accepts all insurance, and patients are billed based on their ability to pay.

Community Health is governed by a "user board," composed of people who use the company's health centers. It also operates centers in Middletown, Old Saybrook and Meriden. New London will have three seats on the board.

An advisory committee also will be established to study policy and planning issues that the New London center is considering, such as expansion, scope of services, and new program development. Advisory reports are made to the governing board, which makes the final decisions.