

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Role of health centers like Healthcare Network now more important than ever

*By Staff on July 16, 2020*

Joe LANDON

joelandon@outlook.com



The new Nichols Community Health Center located at 12655 Collier Boulevard in Golden Gate. COURTESY HEALTHCARE NETWORK.

While the pandemic knows no boundaries when it comes to whom it affects, it seems people who are economically needy are liable to struggle the most. People with no health insurance, and those dealing with financial hardships, are especially vulnerable and likely to need the most assistance.

The new Nichols Community Health Center joins the ranks of those lending a helping hand at just the right time. The center was opened in June by Healthcare Network, a nonprofit organization, which has long been dedicated to providing primary medical care to everyone — regardless of economic status.

“Six years in the making, the center provides Golden Gate and surrounding communities access to affordable quality primary care,” says Dr. Emily Ptaszek, president and CEO of Healthcare Network. “During this challenging time, the center will be an important health resource for many, especially those who are unemployed due to the pandemic.”

You may have seen the three-story Nichols Community Health Center building located at 12655 Collier Boulevard in Golden Gate, one of the most underserved communities in Collier County.



Healthcare Network provided a first COVID-19 mass-testing site in the Everglades City community. COURTESY HEALTHCARE NETWORK.

But it's not just Golden Gate that's being attended to by Healthcare Network's free COVID-19 drive-thru testing and other services. They've also offered free testing at all their Collier County practices, including the hard hit community of Immokalee. They even created a first ever testing site in Everglades City, a community that's nearly 40 minutes from any health center.

From the start of the pandemic, Healthcare Network has been coordinating care with state and local governments, health care entities including the Department of Health, other nonprofits and academic institutions aimed at testing and educating residents. They work closely with the Department of Health to determine areas of need and to make certain our most vulnerable populations and underserved communities have access to testing.

And speaking of collaborations, during the crisis, essential frontline workers are invited to discuss coping strategies, reactions and resilience building with qualified mental health professionals thanks to a \$50,000 emergency grant from Direct Relief facilitated by Healthcare Network countywide.

While much was made of the tremendous need during the pandemic in Immokalee in particular, I was surprised to learn Doctors Without Borders had boots on the ground there. Well, Healthcare Network's leadership team primarily worked with Doctors Without Borders to develop outreach and education strategies for testing, and for making sure the non-English speaking population was aware of CDC guidelines. The collaboration allowed Healthcare Network to expand evening and weekend COVID-19 testing to assist Immokalee's migrant farm workers.

<https://naples.floridaweekly.com/articles/making-a-difference-13/>

“Immokalee parents are especially concerned about COVID-19,” says Dr. Jose Salazar, a pediatrician working in Healthcare Network’s Immokalee practice. “They have a lot of questions about transmission, treatment and precautions. But, at the end of the visit, you can see parents are happy they came to see us because of the information, education and reassurance we provide. As they leave, there is always a big thank you for all we were able to do for them.”

But the appreciation is also felt by those on the frontlines for Healthcare Network in the Greater Naples area.

“My overall sense from my patients and their reactions or feedback is overwhelming gratitude that our doors are open and we’re here to serve them, especially during this time of immense change and uncertainty,” says Dr. Courtney Whitt, the network’s director of behavioral health.

And looking beyond COVID-19, Dr. Ptaszek predicts “the role of health centers like Healthcare Network will be more important than ever. Primary care means caring for the whole person and we will continue to do just that as we help patients navigate the biopsychosocial impacts of COVID-19.” She believes that “the psychological impact is going to be profound as people face the long-term impacts of isolation, unemployment and other significant losses or new responsibilities. Primary care must continue to include behavioral health screening and treatment,” says Dr. Ptaszek.

Healthcare Network serves approximately 50,000 patients a year with primary medical and dental practices located across the county, including the one at Nichols Community Health Center. To schedule an appointment, call 239-658-3000. To learn more about their mission or to make a donation, visit [www.healthcareswfl.org](http://www.healthcareswfl.org). |

