

New health center ‘for anyone’ to open in Asheville

By JULIE BALL, *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 25, 2016



Dale Fell Health Center CEO Nicholas Apostoleris and board member Sioux Free stand for a picture inside an exam room, inside the new clinic located at 7 McDowell Street Asheville. The clinic is set to open Feb. 8. (Photo: William Woody / wwoody@citizen-times.com)

ASHEVILLE –

A sign on the door of a building on McDowell Street announces next month's opening date for a health center in Asheville.

From the street, you might not notice it. The group behind the Dale Fell Health Center has been cautious.

"You don't want to be advertising something until it's really there," said Nicholas Apostoleris, CEO for the new Appalachian Mountain Community Health Centers. "We haven't wanted to say much about it because you don't want to be giving people wrong information."

The clinic is slated to open Feb. 8. It is planned as the first in a series of health facilities that will be part of Appalachian Mountain Community Health Centers, which are intended to help people least likely to find health care elsewhere.

Only one in four Western North Carolina residents

have some form of commercial health insurance, according to Dr. Jeff Heck, MAHEC president and CEO. The rest are either on public insurance like Medicaid or they are uninsured.

While anyone can access care, the Asheville health center will specifically target homeless residents as part of a grant.

"A lot of the people out there that don't have any Medicaid or any insurance — and even some that do — kind of use the emergency room as their primary care, and emergency rooms are just overrun right now," said Sioux Free, who works for Pisgah Legal Services helping disabled homeless residents gain benefits.

"That's one of the great appeals about this new health center," said Free, who also serves as vice chair of the health center's board. "It's going to hopefully alleviate some of that."

Uninsured patients will pay on a sliding scale. The center will also serve those with public and private insurance.

Organizers plan multiple outreach locations in Buncombe County, including in the Western Carolina Rescue Ministries shelter and in public housing communities.

Eventually, two of the outreach locations, including the rescue mission, will provide clinical services to patients on site.

"You can't just wait for people who are in extreme need to come through your door," Apostoleris said. "You have to build trust with the communities so people want to talk to you and that they know they are going to get respectful care."



(Photo: William Woody / wwoody@citizen-times.com)

Facilities are also planned outside of Buncombe County in other Western North Carolina counties. Apostoleris declined to say where those additional facilities are proposed.

Appalachian Mountain Community Health Centers is the second federally qualified health center in Buncombe County. The other is the Western North Carolina Community Health Services, which operates the Minnie Jones Health Center.

"WNCCHS really has carried a lot of the burden for uninsured in our community over the years," said Scott Parker, director of development for Western North Carolina Community Health Services. "We're looking forward to the new community health center being able to help folks in the community who are uninsured and to help ease that burden."

WNCCHS had about 14,400 patients in 2014, and 58 percent of them had no insurance.

Officials estimated as many as 4,000 of those patients would have qualified for Medicaid had North Carolina expanded the program, but state leaders opted against expansion.

"There are still a lot of uninsured folks in Buncombe County and in Western North Carolina who aren't accessing services anywhere so expanding services for the uninsured should help to ease the burden and allow more access for folks," Parker said.

NEW CENTER

North Carolina is home to 38 federally qualified community health centers. Federal grants are awarded through the Bureau of Primary Health Care.

"What's really key about community health centers is they provide access to care for anyone regardless of their ability to pay," said Ben Money, president and chief executive officer North Carolina Community Health Center Association.

Typically about half of patients at North Carolina community health centers are uninsured, according to Money. But in some parts of North Carolina that number is as high as 80 percent.

These centers provide primary care, but they also integrate those services with pharmacy, behavioral health and some other services.

Community health centers focus on serving those at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or those who are uninsured, "but they can see anyone," Money said.

The federal program is in its 50th year.

"The other thing that's unique about a community health center is, by federal law, a health center has to be governed by a board, and that board has to consist of at least 51 percent consumers of the health center services," Money said. "So the people who actually use the service are the individuals that are governing the organization."

The new center on McDowell will have seven exam rooms. It will operate in 4,700 square feet of space in the LabCorp building in what used to be dental offices.

The center will offer medical services as well as some behavioral health and substance abuse services. Eventually, officials plan to add dental services — something that members of the board pushed for, according to Apostoleris.

"That will be here, but not until the spring," he said.



Artwork from a former homeless patient brightens the waiting room of the Dale Fell Health Center located at 7 McDowell Street Asheville. The clinic is set to open Feb. 8. (Photo: William Woody / wwoody@citizen-times.com)

The clinic is named for Dale Fell, who retired in 2014 as chief medical officer for Mission Health.

Fell served as chairman of the MAHEC board and worked to bring the medical school campus to Asheville. He was also an advocate for rural health care providers and hospitals.

The center on McDowell is expected to see around 2,000 patients a year. Another 1,000 will be seen at outreach locations in Buncombe County.

"I think the board (for the new center) has a very heavy interest in homeless services, the living conditions and challenges and extreme need of the homeless in Asheville in particular," Apostoleris said.

A key piece of the services will be outreach to the homeless and that includes offering clinical services at the Western Carolina Rescue Ministries.

"Unfortunately as great of a health care network that we have in this area, there are still holes that individuals fall through for primary care," said Micheal Woods, executive director of the Western Carolina Rescue Ministries and chairman of the Appalachian Mountain board.

Woods said the shelter sees hundreds of people between the meals it serves, the food boxes it distributes and those who spend the night there.

"I think we're going to be able to have an impact with so many more people and be able to help them, and my hope is to improve the overall health within our population of people," he said.

Woods said the health center was a collaboration of "a lot of folks."

"We had a dream and just kind of pitched it out there and it really began to take form," he said.

Mission Health and MAHEC were part of that collaboration.

"As with many community health centers, there are stakeholders that try to make it happen in the formulating stages, and certainly Mission and MAHEC were central to that along with other community partners," Apostoleris said.

Mission Health and the Mountain Area Health Education Center or MAHEC served as a "sponsoring institution to help get it going," Heck said.

"But now that it's formed, it's an independent entity," he said.

Private medical practices typically can't afford to have a large number of Medicaid patients and self-pay patients "because they wouldn't be able to pay their overhead. They wouldn't be able to pay their bills," Heck said.

"There's a lot of safety net providers out there, but there still aren't enough," he said.

"It (the health center) will be a real benefit to our community in Buncombe County, and I think as Appalachian Mountain begins to open other clinics in some of the other counties, I think we'll see greater access for the most underserved people in the community," Heck said.