

Health Center Stories:

Petaluma Health Center, CA

Petaluma Health Center, CA moved into its new medical home in June, 2011, consolidating three leased properties into one facility approximately one mile from its original site. The project consisted of the purchase of, and renovations to, an existing 51,660 square foot building. The new facility serves the health center's current 13,335 patients, plus provides capacity for an additional 6,743 patients. With a total of 47,239 usable square feet and double the number of examination rooms, the health center can now provide care to all those in the community who face barriers to accessing primary care.

Health Center Background

Petaluma Health Center (PHC) began as an outpatient department of the Petaluma Valley Hospital in 1992, when a local administrator realized that too many members of the community were receiving their primary care in the emergency department. A local physician, who cared deeply for people who struggled to pay for health care services, was hired as the first physician to run the department. Over the next few years more physicians, nurse midwives and nurse practitioners were hired, and in 1996 the department became a health center and was moved to its current location.

Since 1996, PHC has provided high quality, compassionate and culturally competent primary and preventive health care services to many thousands of residents of Petaluma, a Medically Underserved Area of Sonoma County. In 2000, having met the high quality standards required of a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), PHC received FQHC status and simultaneously received Federal Section 330(e) funding to support expansion of services to the uninsured.



Petaluma's new facility at 1179 McDowell Boulevard, one mile from its original site, opened in June 2011.

From the beginning, PHC's governing board has reflected the diversity and concerns of the county residents and ensured that services meet the needs of our community. PHC serves a community in which 61% of residents live below 200% of the poverty level, 49% are Latino, and 32% are uninsured. These patients face many barriers to care, including financial burdens, lack of personal or public transportation, and cultural and linguistic barriers.

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With significant contributions from providers, dedicated support staff, essential funding, and backing by the community, PHC's capacities have grown rapidly. Prior to expanding, PHC employed approximately 19 FTE primary care providers and over 80 FTE staff at three separate locations in Petaluma (FY2008). The health center staff provided services for over 13,335 patients with nearly 69,000 total patient encounters. PHC's primary care services include family practice, obstetrics and gynecology (OB/GYN), family planning, pediatrics, dental, integrated behavioral health, radiology, mammography, ultrasound, laboratory, complementary and alternative medicine, chiropractic, translation, transportation, health education and nutrition counseling services.

Prior to embarking on a capital project, Petaluma operated out of 15,220 sq. ft. of combined facility space in three locations. Overcrowding and cramped conditions limited services and created inefficiencies in care. There was no space to expand critical services such as mental health case management, chronic disease management and education, tuberculosis clinic, nutrition counseling, eligibility services and integrated behavioral therapy services. The health center exceeded physical capacity in 2005 and was forced to convert provider offices, kitchenettes, and even bathrooms, to exam rooms. Providers and staff used a conference room ante-room for one-on-one conferences with patients. The need for more space and services resulted in a 3-4 month, 1,000 patient waiting list for new patients.

Capital Project

PHC purchased and renovated a 51,660 sq. ft. building at 1179 McDowell Blvd., approximately one mile from PHC's existing main clinic. With a total of 47,239 usable sq. ft., the total number of "care" rooms increased from 30 to 61 in which PHC provides care for the low income and uninsured members of the community. Ultimately, 30,000 patients will be able to be served in the new facility. The project provides a safe environment of care optimal for delivering quality health care, alleviating the claustrophobia, staff and patient frustration, and confidentiality issues PHC was experiencing.

After conducting a Needs Assessment, the health center decided to expand mental health, substance abuse, medical, dental and OB services. The new building provides these under one roof, while enhancing services such as financial counseling, care coordination, pharmacy assistance programs, private areas to conduct individual and group counseling, computer kiosks for patients to access health education materials, and teaching/conference rooms that will teach healthy living and offer parenting classes. The interior space is designed based on sustainable design practices and LEED certification is being pursued.

Project Funding/Financing

Petaluma funded the \$17 million project with \$6.45 million in long-term, tax-exempt bonds as well as \$8.9 million in federal grant funding. Additional funding came from donations from UnitedHealthcare, St. Joseph's Medical Center, Kaiser and the Petaluma Community Foundation. Capital Link assisted the health center with a market assessment, business plan, operations and facilities planning and financing assistance services.