

Health Center Stories:

HealthFirst Family Care Center, MA

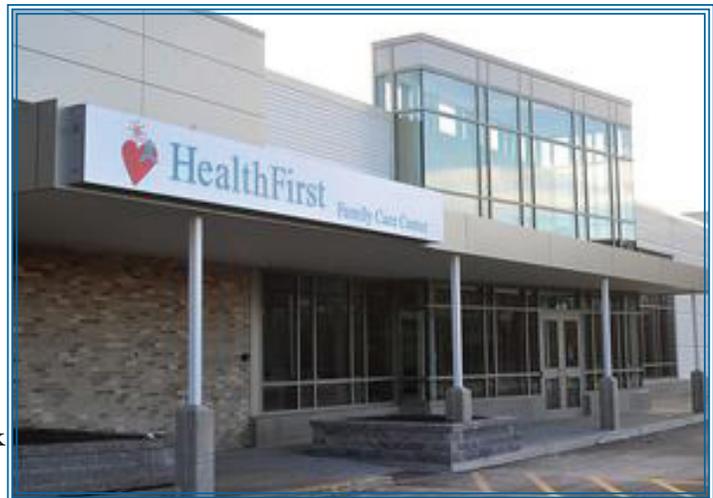
HealthFirst Family Care Center, located in Fall River, MA, is nearing the completion of its new 78,000 square foot facility at 387 Quarry Street, a quarter mile from the health center's current site. The building, used most recently by the former Quaker Fabric and years ago by the former Bradlee's department store, will enable HealthFirst to double its capacity to serve patients. The new site will allow the health center to provide multiple services in one location, providing a model of coordinated care which will result in a reduction of wait time for referrals, elimination of transportation to specialists' offices, and enhanced communication among the various providers.

Health Center Background

HealthFirst has a proud history of providing comprehensive primary health care to the Greater Fall River community. Founded as a Model Cities Project and later called the Fall River Community Development Service Center, the health center relied initially on federal funding passed through the City of Fall River. Today, HealthFirst is an independent, non-profit, federally qualified community health center (FQHC) offering quality, affordable and accessible health care to all residents of Greater Fall River.

Fall River, the eighth largest city in Massachusetts, was once one of the richest cities in America with a booming textile economy. In recent years, however, the mass closures of its mills has contributed to an economic decline resulting in a 12% increase in the city's homeless population and an unemployment rate that increased from 9.5% in 2008 to over 18% in January, 2010, the second highest in the state. The social implications of this withering economy manifest themselves in increased crime and substance abuse. The high unemployment rate in Fall River leaves many people looking for alternatives like public health insurance programs or state subsidies. Those new to unemployment are often embarrassed by their situation and lack the understanding of social and health care programs available to them. HealthFirst assists them in navigating these systems to obtain the services they need.

For many residents of Greater Fall River, the only alternative to seeking preventive and primary care services at HealthFirst is a visit to a local hospital emergency room. An emergency room visit, however, is a poor substitute for a primary care provider. HealthFirst offers a more appropriate and cost-effective "medical home" by providing a host of social and primary care services seven days a week including extended evening hours. Focusing on its core mission to provide access to health care to those who would not otherwise seek it, the health center partners with other service providers to ensure patient access to needed services.



HealthFirst's new facility, scheduled to open in June, 2012.

While services continue to grow to meet the needs of an ever-increasing patient base, HealthFirst was still renting the same 10,000 square feet facility it opened over 38 years ago. The health center currently provides services to 7,598 people per year (or a total of 25,844 visits per year) and employs a staff of 75 in all areas of health center operations.

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The Capital Project

The new center will house 26 exam rooms, double the number at the current facility at 102 County St. It will have nine dental operatories, up from five. Total space will be quadrupled to more than 40,000 square feet, with an additional 12,000 square feet of space available for complementary health care services (including future health center usage) that will increase access to care, improve patient outcomes and generate rental income for the health center. The new center is slated to open in June.

HealthFirst used Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified principals in the renovation project. Each aspect of the design process was assessed for eco-friendly products from floor tiles and paint to landscaping and on-site recycling. Energy-efficient lighting, appliances and extensive use of natural light were incorporated in the design and construction plans for this building.

Project Financing/Funding

The \$13 million capital project benefitted from an \$11.5 million Facility Investment Program (FIP) grant award through the Health Resources and Services Administration under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Financing of \$1.5 million to purchase the building was made through a partnership with Bay Coast Bank, BankFive and the Fall River Office of Economic Development. HealthFirst also conducted a successful capital campaign called “Journey of Hope”, which received donations from Bay Coast Bank, BankFive, the Rodgers Family Foundation, the Massachusetts Dental Society and Stafford & Co. Insurance and many others.

Capital Link assisted HealthFirst with a business plan, space plan, and preliminary and refined financial forecasts to help the center determine sources of financing.