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## After 78 years, Whittier Street Health Center has a space to call its own

Posted by Matt Rocheleau

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

For the past several years, staff at Whittier Street Health Center had to convert closets and bathrooms into examination rooms in order to meet surging demand that drew more than twice as many patients as its facility was designed to handle.

But yesterday the Roxbury community medical center celebrated a major milestone when it opened a new space on Tremont Street that is nearly triple the size of its old home, and, for the first time in its 78-year history, began serving patients out of a building it not only designed and built, but independently owns.

"It's such an emotional journey for the patients and staff. It was very exciting," the health center's president and CEO, Frederica Williams, said by phone Wednesday.

"The patients are just in awe," she said. "It's a wonderful accomplishment."

Housed in a six-story 78,900-square foot building that took \$37 million and the past 16 months to complete, Whittier Street Health Center's new facility sits near Roxbury Crossing – a short ways down and across Tremont Street from where it operated for the past 22 years in a 33,000 square-foot building located in Renaissance Park and owned by Northeastern University.

"We don't believe in turning people away, but people were having to waiting longer to receive care," because of the lack of adequate space at the old facility, Williams recalled. "We kept it clean and safe, but none of us had space to work, and it became very challenging."

At the most recent count, Whittier served a patient base of about 18,500 but its old space was designed to serve fewer than 7,000. Officials at the health center now expect its patient roster will grow to 25,000 by 2013 – two years earlier than the center's staff had previously predicted.

The new building houses a variety of medical and dental offices, a pharmacy, a physical therapy clinic, and community space with educational programs and resources including computer kiosks. There is a mammography clinic and cancer screening and exam rooms run in collaboration with Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

The center's offerings, which have significantly expanded with the larger space, include a primary care clinic, an first-floor walk-in urgent care clinic, a men's health center to serve the large number of male patients who visit Whittier, an HIV clinic, obesity and diabetes programs along with services and therapy for mental health, substance abuse, and domestic abuse patients and those who have witnessed violence.

Its new building, which is under review to receive "Silver" certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green building program, is stocked entirely with new equipment and furnishings. The equipment from its old home was donated to nonprofits.

About 35 new workers, including doctors, nurses and other staff, have been hired so far to work in the expanded space. Another 15 will be hired and working by February's end.

The center took out a \$9 million mortgage and received \$12 million in stimulus funding to construct the new building. Donors provided support including significant contributions from Northeastern, Dana-Farber and Brigham and Women's Hospital. Boston Community Capital, Boston Private Bank & Trust Company, the Property and Casualty Initiative and MassDevelopment all helped finance the project, which broke ground in Sept. 2010.

About 450 construction jobs were filled for to build the new facility on a long-vacant plot of land that was subdivided out from Parcel 3 across from the city's police headquarters.

Whittier is the only health center in Boston federally funded to provide primary care to residents of public housing and one of two refugee and immigrant health assessment sites in the city.

The health center has staff fluent in nearly 20 languages to help serve a diverse group of Bostonians. Many patients visit from Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester and hail from more than 20 different countries. In fiscal year 2010, Whittier saw more than 62,000 clinic visits.

According to figures calculated in recent years, about 82 percent of Whittier's patients live in public housing, half receive Medicaid and just less than one-quarter are uninsured. About 42 percent of the center's patients identify as black and 41 percent as Latino.

The center was founded as a well-baby clinic in 1933 at the nearby 200-unit Whittier Street public housing development in Roxbury.

Patients of Whittier Street Health Center should note that as of Jan. 3, all services began operating out of its new address, 1290 Tremont Street.

For more information, visit <http://www.wshc.org/>.

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