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## Whittier Street Health Center – Home at Last

The history of the Whittier Street Health Center (WSHC) in Boston, Massachusetts, is grounded in its constant commitment to the needs of the community that surrounds it. From its origins as a well baby clinic in 1933, WSHC may have changed addresses a few times through the years but not its mission. The recent opening of its permanent home on Tremont Street heralds a new chapter for the center and the fulfillment of the community's dream.

The new construction of approximately 79,000-square-feet features large glass windows with a view of the city of Boston and the daily outside activity on each floor of the five stories, allowing daylight to stream into the public spaces and waiting areas. Domenech Hicks & Krockmalnic (DHK) Architects wanted the building to be inviting and encourage patients, families, and staff to enjoy the spaces and engage.

The center provides 30 different health and social services for the community, focusing on health engagement, outreach, screening services, health education and assistance. It also provides specialty care and centers of excellence. One of its new programs is a community-based cancer program in collaboration with the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. WSHC also partners with various other health organizations, bringing the doctors to the patients in a setting with which they are familiar.

Through its series of moves from a now-condemned building to temporary lodgings owned by Northeastern University and now to its permanent home, WSHC has always been a vital link to the community. DHK Architects was challenged with working with a very small urban space in a busy area. "We tried a number of schemes that we brought to the table with the health center. They both had two elements to them; One was to make sure the facility was functionally optimal in the way that it operated, that it accounted for all the things they needed, all the different support they needed, but two, and perhaps the most important, accounted for the experience of the users," says Fernando J. Domenech, Jr., FAIA, LEED AP, president, DHK Architects.

Frederica M. Williams, president and CEO, came onboard in 2002 and inherited the burden of trying to find a solution to a problem that had been almost 25 years in the making across changing demographics. "Raising the money for an organization that serves a predominantly low-income population was a challenge," says Williams. By creatively raising funds over a ten year period from federal stimulus funds, small private donations, a construction loan, the New Markets Tax Credit Program and asking the center's former landlord to buy out the lease, WSHC hit the ground running when came time to put shovel to ground. "It was creative financing," says Williams.

The creativity in collecting funds also extended to how DHK Architects approached sustainability. Domenech notes that by focusing on the little things, the center is seeking LEED Silver certification. By using rainwater collection systems below the building, an environmentally friendly selection of materials and finishes, and the way construction debris was handled garnered LEED points for the center even without having the budget to afford more sophisticated systems.

Williams used her love of art in designing and decorating the interior spaces. "I put myself in these patients' situations and what they deal with on a day-to-day basis. I wanted to design a place that says 'this is your community'. We are a community first but we are also a healthcare facility and this is a place of serenity, peace, calmness, respect, and dignity," says Williams. WSHC serves people from 20 different countries and Williams wanted the center to be a place where people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds could feel welcomed and respected. Each floor has a cultural theme communicated through artwork collected by Williams throughout her years of travel, commissioned work from local artists, or artwork from the patients. Along with the help of the large windows, Williams used cheerful, bright paint colors to liven up spaces and convey the cultural significance of certain colors.

Following the guidelines for the National Committee for Quality Assurance, WSHC is designed around the Patient Medical Home Model which focuses on the positive patient experience, expands the delivery of care, and maximizes the relationship between patient and provider. The center is also Joint Commission accredited.

WSHC features a state-of-the-art kitchen where health education takes place for the community such as those who are diabetic and need help in making healthy eating choices. The patients can be educated on how to prepare a well-balanced meal on limited budget. There is also a computer lab for the computer but especially for students to do their homework when they do not have access to such technology in their homes, a large room for community education whether it is financial literacy or GED preparation. "It really is designed as a patient-centered medical home that is also a community center where patients can come and relax," says Williams.

The project was a design-bid-build with a construction manager. Domenech admits he is amazed at the speed at which the project was able to be completed. "The fact that they're occupying it today which is two years after we put the first line on a piece of paper to me is unbelievable and it really attests to the commitment of a lot of people...In fact, we all look at each other and say we can't believe it that it happened all so fast," he says.

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