Erie Family Health Center Expands To Accommodate Growing Need for Services

By Mary Helt Gavin   2/20/2019   2:08:00 PM

The quiet noise – if such is possible – at 1285 Hartrey Ave. comes from a tricky sort of construction: making more room in a working health center.

Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center will add 17 exam rooms, as well as space for community programs, Amy Valukas, COO of Erie Family Health Centers, told the RoundTable. The Evanston center is one of 13 Erie Family Health centers in the Chicago area.

Erie Evanston/Skokie serves nearly 6,800 patients a year, said Kate Birdwell, Marketing and Public Relations Manager for Erie Family Health Centers. "This includes approximately 6,000 medical patients and 2,500 dental patients – but many of our patients are both medical and dental patients," she said.

"We are expanding to do more of what we do now," Ms. Valukas said, "providing primary care, behavior care and oral health. Right now we have more need than we are able to accommodate."

Services Offered

"We offer very robust services across the age span – adults, children, seniors, pregnant women." The full range of services includes prenatal care and delivery, pediatrics, breast and cervical cancer screening and other women's healthcare, internal medicine, behavioral health and health medicine.

Ms. Valukas said, "We see anyone, regardless of their ability to pay. We don't ask about citizenship status."

Erie provides services on a sliding-fee scale to clients of all ages and demographics. All staff members who deal with patients are fluent in English and Spanish, she said. Staff members in other clinics may be fluent in other languages, and, when no staff member knows the language of a patient, a language line is available that offers translation services in 50 languages, Ms. Valukas said.

In addition to primary care, staff at Erie offers patients suggestions to enhance their health care and that of their families, help them navigate the often tricky health-care system and connect them to needed resources.

Erie has strong partnerships with both Evanston and Saint Francis hospitals

Infants and Children: Erie offers follow-up home visits to new parents, as well as regular checkups, school physicals and vaccinations for children.

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“There is a growing awareness of the social determinants of health,” Ms. Valukas said. Exposure to lead, lack of physical exercise — often because there is no safe space for it — poor nutrition, unsafe water and exposure to violence all affect a child’s health.

To promote early learning, Erie’s “Reach Out and Read” program offers children age six months to 5 years a new book at each visit. “They have a chance to build their own library,” Ms. Valukas said.

 Teens: The Centers for Disease Control defines “teens” as youth between the ages of 12 and 24, and Erie follows that definition. With Erie, teens can learn to manage their own health care — set up appointments and pick up prescriptions. “Adolescents seek less healthcare than others, yet they have more health problems,” Ms. Valukas said. Nonetheless, she said, “we want families involved as much as possible in teens’ care.”

Erie has always offered free and confidential testing for sexually transmitted infections but now does so on a more relaxed scale. With drop-in hours, a friendly staff, “we are less about scheduled appointments and being late.” The location, just a few blocks from Evanston Township High School, may also draw teens who may be in need of health care but reluctant to start out on their own — or unaware of how to go about it.

 Behavior health: Everywhere there is a shortage of psychiatrists, Ms. Valukas said. Erie offers behavior health care to “established patients” — those who have been patients for at least three years.

 Seniors: “We want to be able to serve families and to make sure we are doing this across the age span,” Ms. Valukas said.

 Erie staff offer help to seniors and others who are transitioning from one form of insurance to another, such as Medicaid or Medicare. Case management and follow-up care can include making sure the patients have the physical equipment — oxygen or a walker, for example — they need at home.

The New Space

The 17 new exam rooms will accommodate more patients and increased staff. New faces will include some family medicine residents from the University of Chicago (NorthShore) Family Medicine Residency program.

Bright purple on several of the new walls of the expansion site greeted visitors as Ms. Valukas offered a short tour. “We believe in creating facilities that are calming,” Ms. Valukas said, adding, “We embrace our purple.”

The expansion began earlier than expected, Ms. Valukas said, thanks to gifts from NorthShore University Health System and the Finnegan Family Foundation.

The new space will expand the space of Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center but will not dilute the commitment to care. “We want to be the medical home for families,” said Ms. Valukas.