The Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center is adding exam rooms and medical staff in a move officials say will allow the community health center to serve thousands more patients.

The planned expansion includes 17 exam rooms, the addition of 18 medical residents and increased space for behavioral health and training events. Officials say the changes will ultimately allow the 5-year-old center to serve more patients over the next three years.

“When the opportunity arose to expand our capacity we were excited to do that,” said Amy Valukas, chief operating officer for Erie Family Health Centers.

Staff should begin using the new space over the next month, Valukas said. The additional exam rooms will double the amount of space where doctors can see clients.

Valukas said the Affordable Care Act, passed into law in 2010, “has been the core building block to all of this,” including opening the center in Evanston about five years ago.

The ACA, commonly known as Obamacare, aimed to ensure all Americans had health insurance. Features include insurance exchanges, where people can buy health insurance if they cannot or do not receive it through an employer. It also gave states the option to expand Medicaid, the state and federal health insurance plan.

Illinois was one of the states that expanded Medicaid, allowing access to low-cost health insurance to a greater number of people earning smaller incomes. That population makes up a large part of patients who seek care at Erie, whose doctors will serve anyone, regardless of income or insurance, Valukas said.

About 30 percent of Erie’s patients remain uninsured, Valukas said, and those patients pay for services on a sliding scale determined by income. Erie operates 13 locations in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs and serves about 75,000 patients per year.

Meanwhile, the number of patients has grown at Erie’s Evanston location to 6,800, according to Erie statistics. The expansion should allow Erie providers to serve 4,000 more patients. The clinic sits on the corner of Dempster Street and Hartrey Avenue.

The 18 medical residents, who are working there as part of their training as medical doctors, are part of the NorthShore

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Erie Family Health Centers doubles size of Evanston/Skokie clinic, Continued

University HealthSystem working with the University of Chicago Family Medicine Residency program, Erie officials said. They should begin work at the clinic in July.

“NorthShore University HealthSystem and Erie Family Health have a shared and long-term commitment to increase access to medical care for the underserved, and we’re proud to extend this vital community partnership,” said Sean O’Grady, chief clinical operations officer at NorthShore, in an email. “We’re happy to provide support for the expanded clinic and for the graduate medical education that will help staff the clinic. It’s a collaboration that has and will continue to provide great benefit to the community.”

Valukas said she hopes training at Erie might inspire some of those residents to pursue a career in health care for underserved patients.

“Many choose to serve in community clinics when they train in this setting,” Valukas said.

Officials from both Evanston and Skokie welcomed the growth at their local clinic.

The expansion “means more people can be served in this general area of Evanston and Skokie,” said Evanston Mayor Steve Hagerty. “It takes people away from the emergency room and gives them better long term care.”

Catherine Counard, director of health for the village of Skokie, said that “access to care is one of the four main priorities” for Skokie’s health department. This expansion helps meet that goal.

Counard called Erie’s growth “a wonderful response to the needs of our community.”