

West Cecil Health Center cuts ribbon on dental clinic

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Mark Luckner, executive director of the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission; Jay Perman, president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore; Delegate Kevin Hornberger; John Ness, CEO of West Cecil Health Center; Susan Stephens, chairwoman of West Cecil's board of directors; Cecil County Executive Alan McCarthy and Harford County Executive Barry Glassman take scissors to the ribbon, celebrating the official opening of the Perryville dental clinic Tuesday.

CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY JANE BELLMYER

PERRYVILLE — Although West Cecil Health Center has been operating the 8-year-old University of Maryland School of Dentistry dental clinic since July 1, it became official Tuesday with a ribbon cutting ceremony.

John Ness, West Cecil's newly-installed CEO, said the addition of the 26-chair facility in the Principio Medical Park continues the mission to "remove barriers and improve access to care."

"This project has opened our eyes to what is possible," he told guests and dignitaries in attendance, calling it "impactful work."

Dr. Jinlene Chan, acting deputy secretary of the Maryland Department of Health, said having West Cecil operate the 12,000-square-foot dental clinic will mean better comprehensive care for anyone who becomes a patient.

"We all know dental health is integral to overall health," Chan said.

Under the West Cecil umbrella, a patient who comes in for dental care will also be referred to other services as indicated.

"We'll ask about their primary care. We want to become their trusted health care source," she said. "We're not just going to say, 'Hi, Let me look at your molar.' It's whole health."

Chan said another goal is to get dental care out of hospital emergency departments.

"There were 52,000 emergency room visits for dental issues in Maryland in 2014," she said. "We want to put care in the dental chair and not the ER."

West Cecil Health Center began in 2008 with an office on Rowlandville Road near Conowingo Elementary School. To date, almost 11,000 patients have been seen, equalling 68,992 visits. It became obvious soon after the opening that a newer facility would be needed.

By August 2013, the center had moved a mile away to an almost \$6 million facility that included an on-site pharmacy, behavioral health center and other additional services.

Meanwhile, the University of Maryland School of Dentistry opened in 2009. However, the university, citing the financial burden of the operation, planned to shutter the school. That ignited the effort to bring the clinic under the auspice of West Cecil, while retaining its relationship with the dental school.

Dr. Jay A. Perman, president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore, said the partnership between the dental school and WCHC brings together two mission-driven programs.

"And it's not just about providing excellent care. It's about providing the care regardless of the ability to pay," he said, adding that care is done with the dignity of the patient in mind.

During the ceremony, there were kudos for the community partnerships and thanks to the many elected officials who had a hand in making the new ownership of the school a reality.

The University of Maryland School of Dentistry will continue to track students in both the dentistry and dental hygienist programs.

Emily Davis, a North East native and recent graduate of the dental school, is now on staff at the West Cecil Health Center clinic.

"I spent time here. Now I work here full-time as a dentist, so I've come full circle," Davis said. "I was born and raised here so I feel I can connect with the patients."

Davis now oversees the incoming students who arrive at Perryville for a two-week rotation as a member of the dean's faculty.

"They come up as seniors, seven at a time," she said. "They get extensive experience here and it's a little bit of a different population here than in downtown Baltimore."

West Cecil received a two-year grant from the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission. Part of the \$325,000 will provide transportation vouchers for patients to get to appointments.

"That means taxi service or medical transportation depending on where they live," Ness said. "We should be able to help a lot of people."

The remaining \$300,000 will support the program until it becomes self supporting, including hiring more staff.

"We've hired a dozen people and will be seeking more," he said.

Mark Luckner, executive director of the commission, said a total of \$7 million in grants were awarded statewide.

"These grants have collectively served more than 54,000 children and adults in underserved areas of the state," Luckner said.

At its inception, the clinic was geared toward pediatric patients, but also saw adults for routine cleaning or dental emergencies. It's one of 36 programs in Maryland born from the death of a Baltimore City boy from a dental infection.

Under West Cecil Health Center's operation, the dental facility is now available to all. Jessi Rando, a registered dental hygienist, said it's already a busy place with every chair filled.

Those patients familiar with the clinic will notice a few changes, Rando said. With the goal of comprehensive care, there will be private rooms for taking registrations, and the receptionist area is being separated from intake, again for patient privacy.

Susan Stephens, president of the board of directors, said it all comes back to the primary mission.

"West Cecil is all about helping the uninsured and underinsured and making sure they get quality health care," Stephens said.

The reception that followed the ribbon cutting ended by 1 p.m. when patients with appointments would begin to arrive.