

The Bulletin

By [Adam Benson](#) The Bulletin

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17,000 flags celebrate National Health Center Week

NORWICH - On nearly any summer day, Norwichtown Green presents a welcoming place for residents to gather for lunch or other social occasions.

But for the next week, the historic parcel will look even more visually striking – courtesy of 17,000 white and blue flags installed by United and Community Family Services on Sunday to celebrate National Health Center Week.

Each banner represents a person who was served last year at one of the Norwich-based nonprofit's five community health centers across the region.

"I don't think people understand the full impact UCFS has on the communities we serve, so we wanted to show them," said Pamela Kinder, its vice president of marketing.

As the flags rippled in the breeze Monday, Norwich resident Dulce Pontes brought her children and niece to the green where they ran through the flags and posed for pictures.

"I saw these and wanted to know what they're all about. It's beautiful, and it's peaceful," she said.

On Sunday, 30 volunteers fanned out across the green for six hours to plant the flags, which will be on display through Friday. Officials will then give them away and invite members of the public to take one for themselves.

The display is also a chance for UCFS to advertise itself as the nonprofit continues to push for the coveted federally qualified health center designation by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Kinder said Norwichtown Green is significant because the roots for the organization were planted there in 1876 by Emily Davies and Fannie Palmer.

"In 1876, two women walked across the Norwichtown Green to discuss a way to relieve all forms of suffering and in 1877, UCFS was incorporated based on the wishes of those two women, so we thought it was fitting to have these flags here," she said.

Earlier this year, UCFS submitted its third application for the federal health center label in six years. It became a federally qualified health center "look-alike" in 2002, which allowed it to seek enhanced reimbursements for Medicare and Medicaid.

Full status brings annual operating grants of up to \$650,000, and UCFS officials already have a plan for using the money. It would add 24 health care jobs, allow for a 34 percent increase in clients and help pay for a new school-based health center at Montville High School.

As of 2013, there were more than 1,200 federally qualified health centers across the country including 13 in Connecticut, according to the National Association of Community Health Centers.

That includes Willimantic-based Generations Family Health Center, which obtained the status in 1992 and has offices in Danielson, Norwich and Putnam.

With its current status, UCFS is unable to compete for combined capital and operating grants of nearly \$100 million that have poured into the state over the last several years for the qualified health centers.

President and CEO Chuck Seeman said UCFS missed the first round of funding for this year, but hope to be considered for a second later this summer.

However, there's a major hurdle UCFS has been unable to clear in its quest for full federal recognition.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Connecticut's 2013 median household income of \$67,098 was the fifth highest in America.

"We happen to live in a part of the country where cost of living is significantly higher, so a person at 150 or 200 percent of poverty is living the same economic conditions as a person living at poverty in Mississippi, Louisiana or other states," Seeman said. "Until the government changes the way it defines poverty, it should be regionally and not nationally, that's not going to change, and it's out of our control."



United Community & Family Services installed 17,000 flags on the Norwichtown Green to celebrate National Health Center Week. Each flag represents a client or patient that used UCFS in Eastern Connecticut this past year. Aaron Flaum/ NorwichBulletin.com

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