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New UCFS school-based health center opens at Norwich Tech

NORWICH — Two students had visited the new United Children and Family Services school-based health center at Norwich Technical High School by 10 a.m., within hours of its opening on Thursday

The students were able to get physicals at the new facility, which is staffed by four UCFS personnel, including a behavioral health assistant, pediatrician, nurse manager and medical assistant.

"We know that if we can get to them while they're in school, we can do preventive medicine, get them treated more quickly and back into the classroom," behavioral health clinician Cara Westcott said.

The staff also is able to identify any budding behavioral health issues, such as depression or anxiety.

About 675 students at the school are enrolled to receive care from the health center, according to Westcott.

UCFS worked with Norwich Tech for about a year to bring the health center to the school.

"There was kind of a movement for technical schools and the association to work with community partners to bring in health centers," Westcott said. Norwich Free Academy and Grasso Tech also have school-based health centers, both run by Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut, Westcott said. The Norwich Tech center is the first opened by UCFS, she said.

"We put our heads together, created a business plan and made some upfront investments to make it happen," Westcott said.

The school also has a separate room for counseling services.

"We're very excited to have the school-based health center, because it offers a different level of care for our students," Principal Nikitoula Menounos said. "We started with the Smiles dental program once per year, so this is the next step."

Parents must fill out forms to enroll their child or children in order for them to use the health center. It's only open to students. The UCFS center also works hand-in-hand with the Norwich Tech school nurse, who maintains the enrollment paperwork.

"(Parents) have to give us permission to see the children," staff pediatrician Dr. Ramindra Walia said. Parents also fill out the student's health history.

Simple ailments such as cough, runny nose or ear ache can be addressed on site, he said. The center also is able to refer students to the family's physician or pediatrician, such as if a student becomes ill in class and then is examined by the health center.

"We maintain records we can immediately send to the pediatrician," Walia said. The center also can serve as a referral source for mental health care, he said.

"That is so useful. If we can get those kids connected to behavioral health services, that's a big chunk of population that just falls through the cracks," Walia said.

UCFS has an advantage because it has its own pediatric offices, Walia said. Most other area school-based health centers are run by Child and Family Agency, which doesn't have outpatient pediatric practices, he said.

The health center contains the same medical supplies and medications that are available at the main UCFS location, UCFS nurse manager Nancy Holte said.

"We have sports physicals. We will keep in touch with your pediatrician. It's important to keep them in the loop," she said.

Holte said the center is a good starting point to care for behavioral health issues.

"There's a lot of anxiety and depression that goes undiagnosed," she said. "It's a bigger picture than just the school-based health center. We work together with behavioral health for our children."



Nancy Holte, nurse manager, a United Community and Family Services employee who works in the School Based Health Center at Norwich Technical High School checks the blood pressure board Thursday at the newly opened center. John Shishmanian/NorwichBulletin.com

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