

The Bulletin

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UCFS official: The sky is the limit now

NORWICH - After a years-long effort to obtain a coveted federal designation that would make it eligible for millions in aid, United Community and Family Services finally prevailed.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services granted the Norwich-based nonprofit full status Tuesday as a federally qualified health center, paving the way for \$1.1 million in funding over the next two years that will be used to hire 24 full-time jobs, allow for a 34 percent increase in clients and help pay for a new school-based health center at Montville High School.

"I think it's got to be one of the high points in the history of the organization," UCFS CEO and President Chuck Seeman said. "To me, the foundation is now complete, and the next CEO who takes over has something to really build upon. I think we've put all the bricks in place, and it's just ready to go the next stage."

Tuesday's announcement came in the midst of National Health Center week, which UCFS is celebrating with 17,000 flags it installed on Norwichtown Green – one for each person served last year at one of its six community health facilities.

UCFS became a federally qualified health center "look-alike" in 2002, which allowed it to seek enhanced reimbursements for Medicare and Medicaid. It has tried three times in the past six years to shed its "look-alike" status.

That's because UCFS has been 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 Connecticut's 13 federally qualified health centers, which includes Generations in Willimantic.

UCFS will also be able to wipe \$200,000 in yearly expenses off its books in malpractice insurance costs, now being covered through the Federal Tort Claims Act.

"I was getting increasingly discouraged and frustrated, because it felt so unfair that our service area was being frozen out. To me, it's like the sky is the limit now," said Nancy Cowser, UCFS's vice president of planning. "We are seeing more and more folks who are trying their best to make it day in and day out but need access to health care, and our service area is finally on equal footing. It's justice."

UCFS missed the initial round of funding in May, but its application was among six in Connecticut approved Tuesday.

Mayor Deb Hinchey, a former UCFS board member, said she was elated.

"You can't have a community advance if their health needs aren't taken care of," she said. "There's no other way for people to change the direction their life has taken."

State and federal lawmakers have consistently backed UCFS's application, and U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said in a statement he welcomed Tuesday's announcement.

"This new designation for UCFS is the result of a long, hard-fought battle to win well-deserved recognition for the excellent care that they provide for military families and veterans, seniors, Medicaid and Husky recipients, expecting moms and other members of the Norwich community," he said.

In October, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy became the first sitting governor to write a letter of support for the nonprofit's attempts at federal recognition.

"I have personally visited UCFS and have seen that as a 'look-alike,' they provide high quality, comprehensive medical services that the residents of their service area can all count on," he wrote. "Over its 130-year history, UCFS has repeatedly shown its willingness to step up and meet community needs regardless of status, and deserves the opportunity to continue doing so on a level playing field with their colleagues."

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