

By [Adam Benson](#) The Bulletin

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## UCFS tries once again for federal certification

NORWICH - With all the successes United Community and Family Services can claim over the past several years, one coveted laurel has remained elusive: certification as a federally qualified health center.

It may seem like a bureaucratic detail, yet without the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services stamp, the Norwich-based nonprofit is unable to compete for millions of dollars in grants to maintain its infrastructure and enhance existing services.

But with the next round of approvals expected to be announced in May, officials at the 135-year-old institution are more optimistic than ever about their chances of finally gaining national recognition – which brings much more than prestige.

“We’ve done it well despite a lack of federal funds, so I think our compelling argument is, ‘think of what we can do with it,’” Nancy Cowser, UCFS vice president of planning, said. “This will allow us to do so much more to meet community needs.”

This is the organization's third try at the designation 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 about how some of that would be used. 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.

“You don't get the operating grant to continue doing what you're already doing. You have to show what more you're going to do with it,” Cowser said.

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 Connecticut's 13 federally qualified health centers.

It's also unable to secure Federal Tort Claims Act malpractice coverage, which costs UCFS almost \$200,000 annually to protect its providers.

UCFS is one of three “look-alikes” in the state.

“It puts us on a level playing field with all the other FQHCs in the state, and by that I mean it brings much needed funding into New London County, which we don't get right now,” UCFS CEO Chuck Seeman said.

Nancy Barnhart, a Groton resident and frequent donor to UCFS, said she was excited to learn of its pending application.

“I think it's fantastic,” she said. “I really do think they put a good service to people, and I want them to be able to continue what they're doing.”

During an August campaign stop at the expanded Edward & Mary Lord Family Health Center in Norwich, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy told The Bulletin he planned to send a letter of support on behalf of the nonprofit.

“I'm a big believer in this particular model of provision of health care services, particularly to an under-served community, and this area of the state is under-served,” he said then.

Two months later, he followed through on that promise – becoming the first sitting governor to back UCFS's efforts at federal designation.

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2<sup>nd</sup> District, also wrote a letter in favor of UCFS's application - co-signed by U.S. Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy and U.S. Rep. Jim Himes.

“If we want to have a coherent system of care for people that move to one region or another, getting UCFS into the system benefits everybody,” Courtney said in an interview. “There's a lot of applications this year from all across the country and it's very, very competitive so I'm afraid to make any predictions, but I feel passionately they are exactly what the department should identify as an outstanding center.”

Cowser said UCFS submitted one of among roughly 800 applications, but only about 150 will be approved.

Seeman said a problem UCFS faces with its application is it's competing for status against claims from much larger states with rural populations that sometimes have to travel several hundred miles to the nearest health center.

By comparison, according to the national data, Wyoming – the 10th biggest state by total area but least populated – has five federally qualified health centers.

Another challenge is economics. 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.

“While Norwich and this region may be fairly poor and show the need for a population who does not have access to health care services, it really pales in comparison to other parts of this country where the poverty rate is significantly higher,” Seeman said. “I think one of the things they're looking at is, ‘is there an FQHC in close enough proximity,’ so Connecticut doesn't necessarily live up to that.”

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