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Published on 3/25/2008 in [Home](#) » [Region](#) » [Region News](#)

Norwich — Two weeks before the City Council will have to start pondering difficult budget issues, members of the City Council got an inside look at what United Community and Family Services does for the greater Norwich area.

The multifaceted health and social-services agency runs a wide range of programs with its \$17 million annual budget, including adult and pediatric primary health, dental and mental-health services, geriatric medical services, adult day care, home health aids and referral services.

The agency's health center at 47 Town St. hopes to embark on a major expansion project that would bring the city's immigrant welcome center to the front office.

The City Council held its second community outreach meeting at the health center Monday, but the roles were reversed, as UCFS Executive Director Chuck Seeman and several agency staff reached out to aldermen for both financial and political support.

Seeman said UCFS requested \$185,000 from the city in the coming 2008-09 budget, an increase of \$12,000 from this year's total of \$173,000. City Manager Alan Bergren will present his proposed budget to the City Council April 7, including a recommended amount for UCFS.

Seeman also asked for the city's help in freeing up about \$8 million in state funding that had been approved and budgeted last spring, but has yet to be released by Gov. M. Jodi Rell's administration.

"It was negotiated and placed in the budget," Seeman told the council, "We should have seen that money July 1. And it's not just us. It's statewide."

Alderman Robert Zarnetske asked Seeman to write a letter that would appeal for the funds to be released and send it to Bergren. City officials would sign onto it in support and send it to Hartford, Zarnetske said.

In his presentation to the council, Seeman said the 130-year-old agency has been growing rapidly in recent years with an ever-growing need for health care services. UCFS saw 4,519 "unduplicated" clients last year for primary health care, behavioral or mental-health services and dental care. Many came for multiple services, with a total of 22,823 visits.

UCFS provides services to both insured and uninsured clients, seeking reimbursements through insurance or government Medicare, Medicaid and other state programs. Clients who can afford to pay are billed on a sliding-fee scale, he said.

In general, 40 to 50 percent of the agency's clients are Norwich residents, although UCFS has several facilities throughout New London County. The agency just opened a new health center in Griswold on Feb. 25.

Debbie Kievits, a single mother with two children, said she has been a UCFS client for 15 years. Kievits, now on the agency's board of directors, praised the agency for quality services and providing parental peace of mind.

"As a single parent, I struggled with a lot of things, but I never worried about health care," she said. "I took advantage of a lot of programs here."

The number of clients in the children's dental program alone has been skyrocketing. In 2005-06, the program saw 367

children. This year, UCFS expects to see 567 children.

To reach even more children, UCFS has established school programs in 11 towns, including Norwich. Seeman said dental hygienists are seeing high school students at Norwich Free Academy who say they have never been to a dentist before.

UCFS also recently added a military support program for soldiers returning from Iraq and their families, geared especially for handling posttraumatic stress disorder.

Some aldermen said they were surprised to learn that UCFS provided such a broad range of services and recommended that Seeman raise awareness about what the agency does on a daily basis.

Seeman said UCFS has no money for luxuries such as advertising or marketing. With low federal and state reimbursement rates and some \$300,000 per year in written-off uncollectible bills, UCFS is hurting financially, Seeman told aldermen.

"We're losing money on an annual basis," he said. "This year, we're losing \$200,000. We don't have a marketing budget."

Norwich