



## Community Health Center of Burlington, Inc.

### A HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER OF BURLINGTON

#### **The First Decade 1971-1980: A “New Kind of Health Clinic” Begins**

In August 1971, the People’s Free Clinic issued its first press release, announcing “a new kind of health care” for the people of Burlington. At last, the inadequacies and inequities in the health care systems which were affecting many Vermonters would finally be addressed in this small neighborhood clinic. By acting locally, the People’s Free Clinic founders envisioned this mission would make a resonating statement that every person --regardless of age, class, or gender -- deserved good medical care despite their ability to pay. They believed that health care was truly a human right, not a privilege for elite groups with the means to pay for services.

#### **How the People’s Free Clinic Came Together**

The roots of the People’s Free Clinic hearkened back to the late 60’s and the blossoming commune movement. Representatives from different communes scattered across the state met to discuss their needs: food, transportation, and most notably, medical care. Called the “Free Vermont” alliance, this groups set up a task force to organize medical facilities. The first proposal envisioned was a traveling van, staffed by one doctor and one paramedic who would travel from commune to commune as well as serve other community members in need. The second model combined the van with an in-town clinic that would be the headquarters and serve the surrounding community. One fundamental idea generated by the communes was to train non-medical people to learn health care skills. While the vision of the traveling van was never realized, the Free Vermont alliance was ultimately successful in realizing their vision of a neighborhood free clinic.

#### **Opening the Doors to the People’s Free Clinic**

On Thursday, August 19th, 1971 Chittenden County was introduced to the People’s Free Clinic. The clinic opened its doors to everyone—regardless of insurance status—and welcomed the community to free health care. True to its beliefs, the clinic was located in Burlington’s Old North End to better serve residents most in need. The clinic’s first home and ultimately one of several in the first years, was the Urban Youth Center at 260 North Street. The clinic was open three evenings a week with an entirely volunteer staff, including some residents or attending physicians from Mary Fletcher Hospital who believed in the vision of the clinic. Doctors were only available two nights a week. If care was needed at other times, the clinic was staffed by trained personnel who were available to answer questions, take care of minor wounds and provide information on general health care and good nutrition. It would be a long journey for the clinic to offer services to the all the people they wanted to reach as all nurses and doctors worked on a volunteer basis with donated medicines, supplies, and equipment.

#### **Serving Community Need**

It didn’t take long for the community to discover the People’s Free Clinic. Over the next few years, the Clinic would expand to afternoon hours, provide patients with blood pressure assessment, strep cultures, test for “venereal disease” and gynecological exams. This success in treating a growing number of patients did not go unnoticed and more volunteers became interested in offering their services. By 1974 there were twenty-five people involved in running the clinic; all still on a volunteer basis. Fifteen people training as paramedics and two physicians worked regularly as the main providers. That year, a paramedic training was organized in which thirty people showed an interest. Each year the clinic grew in number of volunteers and number of community members served. The following year (1975), the clinic was open three days a week and saw about fifty people per week. While the clinic still cared for a mostly low-income population, its quality care began to attract other idealistic and politically motivated patients who wanted to provide financial support. At this time, the very beginnings of the AIDS epidemic were also spreading to Vermont.

The Clinic began caring for some of the early cases in the state. The medical expertise and bedside manner that would define the organization for the future had begun to take root.

### **The Struggling Years**

Despite their success, a priceless mission didn't pay the bills. The People's Free Clinic often struggled to keep their doors open and the clinic running well. A "restructuring collective" was formed to address the most prevalent issues the clinic was facing. This collective board tackled the issues of the day, including an ongoing need for funding.

In 1974, they estimated that the monthly cost to keep the clinic running was \$500: \$200 to rent the space, \$20 to pay the phone bill, \$50 or more to pay for other utilities, and \$200-250 to purchase medicines used to treat patients. Like many other non-profits, they hosted fundraisers like concerts and dinner dances to fund the clinic.

However, in the long term, these efforts would not sustain the community health center model the collective was beginning to envision. The People's Free Clinic worked hard to organize their growing organization. By 1977, they were administratively able to receive federal and state funding to subsidize their now respectable annual budget of \$40,000.

The Clinic also turned to their patients to provide a sustainable funding stream. It was extremely important that no patients were turned away because of their inability to pay. In response, a new sliding-scale payment plan was put into effect for all patients. In keeping with the spirit of the mission, the lowest income patients would still be able to receive quality health care at no cost and higher income patients would pay higher, appropriate amounts for their care. This was a fair way for the community to support the clinic, which provided them with much needed, accessible health care.

### **The Clinic Gets a New Image and a New Name**

Nearing the end of its first decade, The People's Free Clinic was beginning to assume a much bigger role in the community than when it first opened. In addition to addressing the great need to provide accessible medical care to low income residents, the clinic was moving slowly toward a larger presence of assuming the role of taking on the medical needs of the homeless community. It was a natural progression for the clinic to want to change its image from one of a "hippie clinic" to a substantial medical establishment serving real medical needs in the community. In recognition of this hope for their small clinic, The People's Free Clinic began its second decade with a new name, the community Health Center of Burlington.

### **The Second Decade 1980-1990: Sustaining Growth and Mission**

As the new Community Health Center came into its second decade, the "hippie clinic" was fading fast. The collective Board was replaced by a Board of Directors more typical of non-profit organizations. The Health Center began to accept employer based health insurances and Medicaid. There were "continuity clinics" established with the UVM College of Medicine as an innovative way for medical residents to provide ongoing care for chronic diseases. The Health Center was beginning to look like a "real family practice."

### **Health Care Politics**

While the Health Center was quietly developing its new clinic model, the political landscape at the time was tumultuous. In 1981, Bernie Sanders started a minor revolution in the Queen City by defeating the long time incumbent mayor of Burlington, Gordon Paquette. This striking political change would deeply affect the Health Center over the next decade; both in the power of its community voice and fostering what is now a successful community health care partnership.

Under Mayor Sanders, city politics turned its attention to health care. A Health Care Task Force was organized with CHCB staff invited to participate. The Task Force held community hearings to determine the health care needs of Burlington and heard a groundswell of support for more access to affordable primary care. At the same time, the new administration looked favorably on the Health Center's work and gave Community Development Block Grant funds to help sustain the Health Center's perpetually lean budget. In 1987, Mayor Sanders made the astonishing move to revoke the tax exemption of the Mary Fletcher Hospital on the grounds the hospital did not provide enough charity care to low income, uninsured residents. While this long battle and many heated debates are now public history, the quiet end to the story

is that the Health Center emerged as a natural community partner for the hospital. The hospital, now Fletcher Allen Health Care, began to provide funding to the Health Center in recognition of its critical role as a safety net medical provider. This support further stabilized the Health Center's budget and enabled the hiring of more physicians and nurses. The clinical practice also began to align more closely with the hospital. Health Center doctors received admitting privileges and developed closer connections with hospital doctors, resulting in volunteer specialty clinics at the Health Center and arrangements for patients without health insurance. In the end, these tempestuous political changes swept the Health Center one step closer toward community legitimacy and established a successful partnership with FAHC that endures to this day.

### **The Homeless Health Care Program**

Relieved of the draining day-to-day financial crises, the 80's brought the Health Center the perceived luxury of expansion and innovation. When the City of Burlington approached the Community Health Center in 1988 with an opportunity to participate in a new federal program to serve the homeless, they were ready. With just two weeks to write the grant, a coalition of local agencies agreed to work together with the Health Center as the lead administrative agency. Acknowledging the barriers to care faced by this especially complicated population, the program model proposed to bring the most needed services for people experiencing homelessness under one roof. They were initially told that Burlington would have little chance for funding because of its low homeless population. Yet the hard work of all the partners paid off when the Health Center was officially awarded the federal status of a Health Care for the Homeless grantee. Still the only organization in Vermont with this designation, this program permanently changed the community approach to care of the homeless. Instead of requiring the patient to seek out scattered services, community partners set up shop in one location to provide a complete umbrella of care. In 1989, the Health Center opened its official second site and Vermont's only clinic designed to care for the homeless at Union Station on the waterfront.

### **Moving Up**

In 1985, stabilizing funding and a respected political voice brought the Health Center out of the meat-locker-exam room space on North Street and into a new building at 276 North Winooski Avenue. When the old Lapidow Pharmacy building became available, the Health Center worked with Burlington Community Land Trust to purchase the building. While the move brought the Health Center theoretically up in the world, the administrative offices were in the ancient basement that flooded regularly. By the end of the decade, a second story capped ten years of successful growth. The new Health Center, painted a delicate shade of pink in homage to the "painted ladies" homes of San Francisco, was modern, functional and welcoming. Three exam rooms were tucked behind saloon style swinging doors, a comfortable reception area greeted patients and the Administrative Manager remained dry during the rainy season.

### **Expanding the Vision**

The Health Center's second decade began a shift in culture and direction. The focus became professionalizing the practice, expanding services and seeing a future as a family practice that took great pride in its unique bedside manner and quality care. The community was also taking note of the practice, with several thousand patients representing all walks of life. With these visionary decisions, the Health Center had unknowingly set the stage to become Vermont's second Federally Qualified Health Center.

### **The Third Decade 1990-2000: Becoming a Family Practice**

By 1990, the Health Center was neatly situated in their new building. About half of their growing patient base was uninsured, reflecting the community need for affordable access to primary care. The Health Center accepted most employer-based health insurances, Medicaid and Medicare. One small holdover from the days of the collective was an organizational structure of shared decision making authority between the Medical Director and Administrative Manager. More typical of mainstream non-profits, the Health Center formalized its Board of Directors to oversee policy making and guidance. The Board met monthly with the commitment, which endures today, to ensure a majority of consumers were represented on the Board. Like most non-profit Boards, finances were prominent in the discussions of the day. In 1990, state and local politics would once again lend a hand in stabilizing the small family practice finances for further growth.

During the 1970's, Health Center staff had petitioned the federal government for official status as serving a medically underserved community. The hope at that time was to secure a National Health Corps physician to support the practice. Based on a physician shortage premise, the application was approved by the regional federal office in Boston, only to meet mysterious opposition in Washington. Hopes for this designation were resurrected again in the late 80's and the political support for the effort gained fresh strength. This time, with the State of Vermont leading the effort, an application was made to declare the Old North End of Burlington medically underserved. This approach, as opposed to trying to prove a physician shortage in such close proximity to an academic medical center, proved successful. The designation was granted based on the extreme poverty and barriers to primary care demonstrated in Burlington's Old North End, downtown and Winooski. Immediately, the Health Center was able to apply to the federal government for status as a Federally Qualified Health Center look-alike. This status, granted in 1990, reimbursed the Health Center for actual costs incurred in caring for Medicaid patients. This funding directly helped support the Health Center's growth and stability to meet the primary care demands of the Burlington community.

By 1993, the Health Center had developed into a unique and by necessity, innovative family practice. The Health Center acted quickly in the early 90's when the first Vietnamese refugees began streaming in the community. Using key community leaders for outreach efforts, Health Center staff and volunteer interpreters created free clinics for Vietnamese patients. While working with interpreters and the quickly changing diversity of Burlington would prove to be exceptionally challenging, the clinic rose to be the provider of choice for the refugee population. At the same time, the Health Center's quality of care and famous bedside manner was bringing in many new patients. While growth was welcome, the Health Center had reached the breaking point. Daily appointments were becoming scarce which in turn limited access. Medical providers were making their own referrals for patients, expending precious provider time and energy. While successful by community standards, Health Center staff caring for non-English speaking patients had gained enough experience to advocate for professional, trained staff interpreters to ensure better confidentiality and quality care. And most definitively, there was not enough space for the new vision for the practice. In the summer of 1993, the Health Center applied to become Vermont's second Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) grantee. The staff heard the news in the fall; they had earned the designation! The Health Center was awarded \$150,000 for capital expansion and \$154,000 for yearly operating expenses. Anything seemed possible.

### **Reinventing the Health Center (again)**

Grant money in hand, the Health Center repeated history and made another move up to the very top of North Winooski Avenue to 617 Riverside Avenue. Moving day in January of 1994 delivered a ferocious storm, blanketing the streets with inches of glare ice.

Abandoning plans to see patients in the new facility for the day, staff slid up and down North Winooski Avenue to bring patient charts back to the old facility. Despite this small setback, the mood of the staff was one of exhilaration. The new space was a business condominium on the second floor of the newly renovated Vermont Mattress and Furniture building. Clinic space was tripled with eleven new exam rooms, a small laboratory, space for medications, provider charting and offices.

Met with even greater anticipation was a social worker who relieved the medical providers of referrals to human services agencies and began the painstaking process of developing a prescription assistance program utilizing drug manufacturers' giving programs. New medical providers, including a full time physician, supported the start-up of the obstetrical and prenatal program. Staff interpreters were hired and trained. A procedure room, along with increased staff, gave uninsured patients the added service of stitches, simple casting and colposcopy on the sliding fee scale. Best of all, every new patient in need of care was welcomed and appointments were plentiful.

### **Growing Pains**

The Health Center's growth skyrocketed as an FQHC. From 1994 to 1998, the number of patients and visits doubled. The staff of 12 would see their numbers rise to 45, making the all-staff lunches around a conference table a distant memory. A successful federal grant would add another clinic site to serve homeless and runaway youth in downtown

Burlington. With this growth and the demands of the FQHC guidelines, the Health Center would face some growing pains. In 1995, the final vestiges of the People's Free Clinic structure would be abolished, replacing the dual decision making authority of the Medical and Administrative Directors with an Executive Director model. The sheer volume of patient visits created pressure for more management structure, more policies and more procedures. While the benefits of growth to the community and patients were clear, the change was difficult. By 1996, the Health Center emerged with a new Executive Director and began to create a formal management structure designed to support the current size, growth and vision of the practice. Despite these growing pains, the Health Center sustained what was most important: the preservation of its mission and unique family practice model that served low income and homeless Vermonters so well.

### **Reinventing the Health Center (once again)**

In 1994, no one on staff would have ever imagined they would face another growth crisis quite so quickly. By the middle of the 1990's, the Health Center was once again facing the prospect of turning away patients in need due to limited space. At the same time, the once beautiful clinical space was showing signs of wear and tear. The long promised condominium association, designed to support building repairs and landscaping, never materialized with the bankruptcy of the building's developer. The fledgling grocery store on the first floor of the building also went into bankruptcy and the property was sold to an out of state mortgage foreclosure company. The outside of the building was in dismal disrepair and no longer reflected the vitality and quality of the clinic. At the same time, there were serious practical concerns about the rest of the building; once purchased and developed, it would be out of the Health Center's control forever. In response, the Health Center's Board of Directors and staff took the proverbial leap of faith and announced a community capital campaign to purchase the building.

### **Building Renewal**

Throughout its history, the Health Center had to fundraise to survive. But this capital campaign was out of their league. The Board, Executive Director and staff had only the faith that they had a story and mission worth supporting. At the same time, organizational partnerships and increasing visibility lent a practical hand to the campaign. Long time friend, Burlington Community Land Trust, and many others doled out countless hours of fundraising strategies, support and encouragement. Vermont's Congressional delegation visited the cramped clinic and pledged to help. The campaign committee gathered friends of friends. Faith fostered faith and soon, success. A congressional earmark and lead gift from Robert and Cynthia Hoehl, the largest in Health Center history, made the dream of the Building Renewal Project a reality. At the end of its third decade, the Health Center found itself once again preparing for another chapter of change. This new gateway building was symbolic of all the others - building once again on the foundation of hard work and commitment to sustaining its mission of care.

### **The Fourth Decade and Beyond: The Health Center Expands Its Vision**

Having accomplished its vision of creating a comprehensive family practice for whole community, the Health Center expanded its vision to that of creating a health resource center that cares for the body, mind, and spirit. The Health Center set out to build a health care organization that would offer holistic care to the community. Walking through one door, a patient could easily access primary health care, integrated behavioral health services, dental care, social services, and alternative medicine.

In the summer of 2001, the Health Center staff of 65 moved the clinical program into the newly renovated first floor of the building. No ice storms, but the size of the clinic, staff and medical records meant the move took several days to accomplish. For the clinical staff, there were eighteen exam rooms and a completely new architectural design. Three patient care team areas provided private, yet accessible charting and discussion areas for teams of medical providers, nurses, medical assistants and clinical social workers. A greatly expanded laboratory meant more lab staff to support new tests and relieved nurses of laboratory duties during their busy days. A medication room organized prescription drug samples and essential over the counter medications, like Tylenol and cough syrup. A private social work room accommodated the increasing number of patients in mental health crisis walking into the Health Center. Upstairs, exam rooms were converted to mental health counseling rooms and offices for new staff. Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center along with private philanthropy furnished a health education room, complete with internet access, patient education materials and space for health education visits.

More importantly and in concert with the Health Center's vision, the new space strategically coincided with a heightened national interest in FQHCs and new funding opportunities. In 2002, the Health Center secured federal grants for expanded medical capacity to hire more medical providers and develop an outreach program designed to locate medically underserved residents. A mental health and substance abuse grant supported full integration of behavioral health services into the primary care program that was one of the first models in Vermont. While competition for this grant funding was fierce, both program proposals achieved a high ranking in the national arena. With these clinical program advances secured, there was an empty space that needed to be filled in the new landmark building. The community needed a Federally Qualified Dental Program.

### **Affordable Dental Care No Longer a Dream**

The community need for affordable dental care had been on the minds of Health Center board members and staff for at least a decade. In developing the Building Renewal Project, the Health Center planned to house a future dental clinic. The success of the project allowed the Health Center to set aside space adjacent to the medical program on the first floor. In 2002, staff was busy expanding the clinical program and the idea of starting up the dental clinic was a plan for the future. But like many of the best-laid plans, the Health Center found itself responding to an unprecedented opportunity with a long time community partner instead.

The Dental Clinic was a non-profit dental practice that was also the sole dental residency site for all of Vermont. Serving a large Medicaid and uninsured population, the Dental Clinic had a mission that matched the heart of the Health Center. The two organizations worked closely together, serving the homeless population and sharing many patients.

However, in 2002, the Dental Clinic faced a dilemma. They had to vacate their thirty-year home at the University Health Center to make way for a badly needed methadone clinic. Their shoestring budget couldn't afford the area rents nor could purchase the new equipment they would need, since their ancient chairs were too old to move. Loss of this safety net practice would have been devastating to local access to affordable dental care. The Health Center, with the assistance of community partners, moved quickly to help. The City of Burlington agreed to provide the Health Center with a small bridge loan of \$300,000 to fit up its empty space into a seven operator dental clinic. The Dental Clinic would move in and work side by side with the medical program while the two organizations worked on a rare non-profit merger.

Within six months, the Dental Clinic had moved into 617 Riverside to a brand new seven operator clinic and the Health Center launched their "Open Wide" campaign to pay off the loan and bring in crucial new technology to support the merger and the burgeoning practice. In 2003, the Health Center once again developed an innovative program design, and applied for FQHC dental funding. Its proposal ranked in the top ten in the country and was funded.

The Federal funding allowed the Health Center to greatly increase the service of the Dental Clinic, expanding it from its original four operatories to eleven operatories in three sites and to formally merge the two organizations. In January 2004, the Dental Clinic and the Health Center opened as one organization to serve the community. In addition to the main dental clinic, the Health Center created the Safe Harbor Dental Clinic to serve the homeless and urgent care patients in Chittenden County. One year later the Health Center opened a school based clinic at H.O. Wheeler School in Burlington's Old North End serving Medicaid and uninsured children without a dental home from all eight Burlington Schools. By 2006, the dental program served over 4,000 patients.

### **Homeless Health Care Program Finds New Locations, Too**

While dental care seemed very much in the forefront, the Health Center was also quietly working to improve its two downtown Burlington sites to serve homeless men, women, children and teens. As the sole federal grantee in Vermont for Health Care for the Homeless funds, the Health Center has both a unique expertise and responsibility to meet the medical needs of their region's homeless populations. The changing face of homelessness, such as increased numbers of women and families, meant a new space was needed. While the old one exam room at a daytime drop-in center had been successful, a new space with private

exam and counseling rooms, health education and meeting space better fit the Health Center's vision of care. In 2003, the Safe Harbor Clinic for homeless men, women and children opened its doors on South Winooski Avenue and quickly increased its patient visits by fifty (50%) percent. Directly across the road from the drop-in center, Safe Harbor offers medical and dental care, mental health and substance abuse counseling, social work support and case management and health education all under one roof. And true to the original 1980's grant, the Health Center still subcontracts for services with other local non-profits.

At the same time, the walk-in clinic for homeless and runaway youth had also reached capacity. Co-located at Spectrum Youth and Family Services, both partners had a vision of the clinic operating side by side at street level with Spectrum's daytime drop-in center. Working with Senator Jeffords, Spectrum secured the funding to renovate space in their building and Health Center donors chipped in to finish the project. In October 2004, the Health Center opened the Pearl Street Clinic, Vermont's only medical clinic designed just for homeless, runaway and at risk youth.

### **Today and Beyond: 2008 Forward**

Today the Health Center serves over 13,000 patients and will provide 74,000 patient visits in our 37th anniversary year: over one thousand of these patients will be homeless, 28% will be uninsured and 74% will be low income. Fifty four babies will be delivered to Health Center families by their own family physicians. Patients will find assistance for their prescriptions and a wide variety of support for the complex challenges they face in their personal lives. We believe the famous bedside manner, compassion and respect that defined the People's Free Clinic is still alive and thriving in today's Health Center. The spirit that drove the founders of the Community Health Center of Burlington is very much alive in us as we look toward the future and think of the possibilities of a world in which health care is a right and everyone receives the care that we give our patients. Together with our community, we look forward to many more decades of careful stewardship of our remarkable mission.