

North Country Hospital's New Primary Care Building

Recently returned from a trip visiting Vermont troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan, Vermont Governor James H. Douglas proclaimed North Country Hospital's new primary care building as the first of its kind built in Vermont.

"It will serve as a model for primary care practices in Vermont," Governor Douglas said during a ribbon cutting ceremony at North Country Hospital on Friday, July 30. "This kind of facility is the wave of the future. This is the first facility constructed in Vermont specially designed to serve the patient-centered medical home model."



Christopher Rickman, MD, an internist with Community Medical Associates, said that in the six weeks his practice has been in the new building he has already seen improved patient and work flow and more efficiency in care. (photo by Pauline Mazotta)

This model of healthcare, which is built around the state's Blue Print for Health for patient care, works to ensure patients have an ongoing relationship with their personal physician who also serves as the head of the patient's healthcare team. The patient-centered medical home model (PCMH) is supported by a Community Health Team. This team consists of health professionals who are instructive and supportive to patients while these patients improve self-management skills. Examples of team members are social worker, behavioral health specialist, diabetes educator, and a registered dietitian.

The building, designed by Lavallee Brensinger Architects, Manchester, NH, cost about \$9-million dollars to build. It is the new home of two long serving North Country primary care practices – Community Medical Associates and the Family Practice of Newport. Between the two practices they provide healthcare services to about one third of the 30,000 people in the North Country coverage region. Both practices are federally designated Rural Health Clinics. The building also houses the Patients Accounts Department, the Central Billing Department, and Community Health.

In addition to Governor Douglas, among other officials on hand were John Tracy, representing U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy; David Reynolds, representing Senator Bernie Sanders; and Susan Elliot, representing Congressman Peter Welch. State legislators present were Senator Vince Illuzzi of Derby, Representative Duncan Kilmartin of Newport, and



Governor Jim Douglas held the ribbon while Kathy Austin, chair of North Country Hospital Board of Trustees cut it - to officially open the hospital's new primary care building on the hospital campus. Those participating in the ribbon cutting were, l-r: Tim Brochu and Rich Pizzi, Lavallee Brensinger Architects, Kim Campbell, VP Medical Group Operations, Dr. Mike Moseley, Medical Staff President, Kathy Austin, Governor Douglas, Mayor Paul Monette, Claudio Fort, hospital president/CEO, and Ben Harrington, JR, president and CEO of H.P. Cummings Construction. (photo by Pauline Mazotta)

Representative Scott Wheeler of Derby. On the local level Newport City Mayor Paul Monette as well as a number of other Newport City official attended the event. Following the ribbon cutting ceremony guests enjoyed lunch and a tour of the facility.

"We are honored by your presence and appreciate your leadership in healthcare issues," North Country's CEO Claudio Fort said to the governor. "In fact, Governor Douglas, we consider this building as part of your legacy, as it was designed specifically to support the Vermont Blueprint for Health Chronic Care Initiative. This is the first primary care building in the State designed specifically to help our providers take care of the growing number of people with chronic health conditions. It provides the space and facilities to incorporate dietitians, social workers, nurse care coordinators, and community health education classrooms under the same roof as the providers. Locating all these disciplines together enables them to work more closely as a team. If it was not for the Governor's leadership in championing the Vermont Blueprint for Health, this building would look very different than it does today."

Lack of access to primary care is a major concern in many sections of Vermont, Orleans County being one of them. Most of the primary care practices are at capacity and not accepting new patients. This sometimes makes it challenging for some people to find a primary care physician when they need one. Hopes are that this new building will help resolve the shortage of primary care practitioners by attracting new ones to the region. Long term strategic planning addressing the lack of access to primary care in the North Country service area determined that construction of a new primary care building would enhance recruiting efforts and provide much needed space to improve access to care.

"I've heard some people question why the hospital built a new facility, given this economy," Fort said. "There have been concerns that this will increase the cost of healthcare to our community. In actuality, the opposite is true: by following the Vermont Blueprint for Health and improving our ability to manage chronic health conditions, we will keep patients out of our emergency room and avoid costly hospitalizations, thus bringing down the cost of healthcare. Also, it is important to state that this building was funded entirely out of reserves; we did not increase the cost to our patients by one cent to fund this building. In fact, I am proud that our hospital had the lowest rate increase of any hospital in the state last year and our staff has been working hard to continue to find ways to operate efficiently and hold the line on health costs for our community."



Reception area for Family Practice of Newport and Community Medical Associates provides patient privacy and a cheerful and comfortable waiting area. (photo by John Hession)

Fort wasn't the only one singing the praises of the new primary care building. Kathy Austin, Chair of the North Country Board of Trustees, praised the hospital administration, staff, and the community for throwing their support behind the project. She noted that the community has a right to expect excellent healthcare. Austin also praised David Bouffard, who was Board Chair during the conception and planning stages of this project.

Dr. Chris Rickman, an internist with Community Medical Associates, said that in the six weeks his practice has been in the new building he has already seen benefits.

"What we are seeing is improved patient and work flow and more efficiency in care," Dr. Rickman said. "Because of more coordinated care, thanks to the medical home models, there will be better medical outcomes for people suffering from acute and chronic healthcare issues."

Newport Mayor Paul Monette also praised the completion of the building and the dedication of the staff at North Country. "We're blessed to have a hospital like this," Mayor Monette said. "The community is dedicated to this hospital."

Members of the hospital administration and medical staff have been working with Dr. Craig Jones, the director of the Blue Print for Health. Dr. Jones was unable to attend the ribbon cutting but he is obviously excited about North Country Hospital's commitment to its patients.

"Our Blueprint team has really enjoyed our planning meetings at North Country," Dr. Jones said. "There is such a strong commitment and culture in the region – to help the people and make sure they have the best healthcare possible. That is evident in the thought and planning that went into the new outpatient center. The center was designed with the needs of patients and families in mind. As the Blueprint expands to North Country this will be an ideal facility. The dedicated clinicians and staff will be able to work with community health team members and provide the best support possible for the areas patients and families. This should be an exciting year."



Congratulations North Country Health System on your new Primary Care Building

