

Battenkill Valley Health Center opens

By **MARY MILLER LEE**

Bennington County now has a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) with the recent opening of the Battenkill Valley Health Center (BVHC) in Arlington. Bennington County was the only county in Vermont without a FQHC prior to the opening. Work on this project began in 2010 with the formation of the BVHC Board, led by Arlington resident Mary Ann Carlson, and Dr. Michael Welther, Arlington Family Practice solo practitioner.

According to Carlson, the BVHC Board and Dr. Welther concluded “the premise of a single primary-care physician was no longer viable in the area.” Rising costs and cuts in Medicare reimbursements were cited as the key contributors to the problem. After researching options, it was determined that the best alternative was to go the route of creating a community health center and pursue FQHC status.

After much hard work, the BVHC was successful in achieving FQHC status in 2013, after their application had been denied twice due to lack of available federal funds. “The break came when

BVHC: 16

the Feds came up with some new money in November, 2013 and we received a grant of \$775,000," Carlson said. The federal grant, coupled with funds raised locally, made the new health center a reality.

The BVHC is a nonprofit, community-based organization. According to Carlson, patients will get more access to health-care services, with a focus on preventative care. In addition to medical care, dental care, mental health and substance-abuse services are also provided. The BVHC will also sell pharmaceuticals to patients at reduced prices.

The services of the BVHC are available to people of all ages from anywhere within Bennington County regardless of their ability to pay or health insurance status. "Part of our job is to help people who are not insured sign up for insurance, we can help them with the process" noted Carlson. There are also plans to do some educational outreach to make people aware of the new facility and what it has to offer.

In addition to federal grant money, which can be applied for again, there are other benefits

to having FQHC status which address financial viability. As an FQHC, they will receive federal Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements at enhanced rates, 25-30 percent higher than those without FQHC status according to Carlson. The sales of pharmaceuticals also produce revenue for the BVHC.

Another benefit of FQHC status, addressing the lack of primary-care physicians especially in rural areas, is the ability to tap into the National Health Services Corps. While there are no plans to do this now, Carlson said "we have access to hire their primary-care physicians, who would get some or all of their medical education expenses paid for by the government. In return, the physician must commit to a placement of 3-5 years." Carlson added, "50 percent of the physicians placed remain in the community placed."

Another FQHC benefit for future consideration is that the Arlington center can create satellite facilities anywhere in Bennington County.

The BVHC is located in the former Arlington Family Practice building at 9 Church Street in Arlington. The 4500-square-foot building has been renovated and upgraded to meet the needs of the BVHC. According to Carlson, the initial staff includes Dr. Welther, who is now an employee

of the BVHC Board, two nurse practitioners and one registered nurse. Additional jobs to be created include a CEO of the health center and a medical director. Eventually, dental hygienists will be added.

While federal funds were critical, significant local funds were raised by local businesses, non-profit organizations and individuals. "We are so grateful for the funds people have given us" said Carlson, further noting that "this is a community-based organization." One of the key supporters is Southwestern Vermont Medical Center (SVHC). "They see the advantages of the BVHC for their patients" added Carlson.

According to SVHC President and CEO Thomas Dee, "SVHC provided a grant of \$150,000 to help establish the Battenkill Valley Health Center as an FQHC because we understand the importance of supporting primary care in an under-served region of our service area. Establishing an FQHC in Bennington County helps ensure that our county has access to the wide range of services an FQHC provides." Dee further added, "The improved Medicare payments that come from being an FQHC also will help ensure that the Arlington and Sunderland portions of Bennington County continue to have access to primary care in the future. SVHC remains committed to continuing to work with the FQHC as it moves forward."

Local business has also been very supportive with Arlington-based Mack Molding pledging \$150,000. "Mary Ann Carlson and Don Kendall, Mack's CEO and president, have long been of like mind regarding community support," said Mack Chief Financial Officer Florence Belnap. "They both believe that education and health care are at the heart of any community. That philosophy has served as the foundation for Mack's philanthropy over the past 90 years and will continue to guide us in the future" noted Belnap.



MARY MILLER LEE

Dr. Michael Welther will be the primary-care physician in the new Battenkill Valley Health Center. The BVHC will be located in the same building on Church Street in Arlington that Welther's Arlington Family Practice was located in.

"The BVHC is particularly satisfying in that it will directly help not only the community at large, but also any of our employees, bringing high-quality, affordable primary care, dental care, low-cost prescription drugs and mental-health counseling to the area" added Belnap.

The BVHC is also enjoying community support. The Arlington Community Public Health Nursing Service has donated \$50,000 and plans to donate another \$25,000. Contributions from individuals range from people "that have donated a couple dollars to one couple who has given \$60,000" said Carlson. ♦