

Sanders congratulates Battenkill Valley Health Center

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ARLINGTON -- Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) congratulated members of the Battenkill Valley Health Center Board for their hard work and persistence Tuesday during a brief meeting at local plastics manufacturer Mack Molding, and encouraged the group to execute bold and innovative ideas in the future.

The meeting came nearly one month after it was announced that Arlington's Battenkill Valley Health Center was chosen to receive a federal grant in the amount of \$775,000 and would thus operate as a federally qualified health center come January. It will be the first of its kind in Bennington County.

In addition to the Battenkill Valley Health Center, the Five Town Health Alliance in Bristol and the Gifford Medical Center in Randolph also received federal funding, upping the current number of FQHCs in operation throughout the state from eight to 11, and bringing the total of Vermonters served under those centers to approximately 63,000.

According to Sanders, the local FQHC, as well as the other 10 centers in Vermont are open to everyone and provide patients covered by Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance and no insurance at all with primary care, dental care, and mental health counseling, and also serve as outlets for low-cost prescription drugs.

On Tuesday, Sanders dubbed the U.S. health care system "dysfunctional."

"It's not only leaving 48 million Americans uninsured, but Medicaid is spending 10 times more than it should because people don't have access to quality, community health care," he said. "I believe that this (FQHC) model can revolutionize primary health care in America. It can save taxpayers and the health care system huge amounts of money."

Sanders went on to say that he considers the local site's potential to be "extraordinary."

"My only advice is be bold," he told the board, using the phrase, "If you've seen one FQHC, you've seen one FQHC," as a way to explain the unique operation of each individual center. "I would encourage all of you to learn from what these others centers are doing, steal their ideas -- there are really a lot of good ideas out there, so explore, experiment and learn. Some ideas will fail, others will succeed, but obviously the goal is to treat illness and keep people healthy."

Mary Ann Carlson, chairwoman of the Battenkill Valley Health Center Board said in an interview with the Banner in November that she anticipates the center will open by January 1.

Tuesday, Board Member Dr. Elizabeth Wrenn Rosenberg said that a plan to open is in place and it is being followed.

"Above all, we're just making sure we've got the doors open and services are available," she said.

As of now, plans to convert Dr. Michael Welther's 9 Church St. family practice into the FQHC include renovating existing, undeveloped office space in the same building as Welther's practice, which will house the additional services offered within the FQHC model, including dental and mental health services.

According to Dr. Paul Stagg, who has acted as project coordinator for the Battenkill Valley Health Center, the board hopes to expand the center's capacity for its patients in about two years.

Carlson noted that although the federal grant has made plans to convert Welther's practice into an FQHC a reality, donations and support from Arlington community members, local corporations, like Mack Molding, and nearby Southwestern Vermont Medical Center have been equally as generous.

According to Carlson, SVMC has agreed to pledge an undisclosed amount of money to the center in the near future, while Mack Molding has publicly pledged \$150,000 to the center.

Additional fundraising within the Arlington community has yielded another \$150,000.

Stagg and Sanders both said in November that plans are also in the works to open a FQHC satellite center in Bennington next year.

This plan was reiterated by Sanders and confirmed by board members Tuesday.

Stagg would not comment on the proposed center's location, but said it would provide the people of Bennington with the same care offered in the Arlington center.

According to Carlson, David Reynolds, a co-architect of the Affordable Care Act and a former health policy adviser to Sanders will visit Welther's office this Saturday to discuss before and after plans for the center.

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Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., speaks Tuesday to the organizers of a new community... (Peter Crabtree)



Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., speaks Tuesday to the organizers of a new community health center in Arlington. Dr. Michael Welther is the practitioner at the Battenkill Valley Health Center. (Peter Crabtree)

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