



Wheeler Clinic Moves Care to Where It's Needed

Fulfilling and Funding Basic Needs for Better Behavioral and Medical Health

By ARIANA RAWLS FINE

Meeting the behavioral health and medical needs of the most underserved Hartford area residents as a community center is a mission Wheeler Clinic has been fulfilling for over 55 years. Wheeler Clinic provides pediatrics for children and adolescents, and medical care for adults, at five outpatient community health centers in Bristol, Hartford, New Britain, Plainville and Waterbury in addition to mobile crisis services, statewide addiction referral, and in-home and community justice services.

Their medical services are integrated with on-site mental health and addiction services, which has proven effective for

well-rounded, central care. In Hartford, they offer dental care for all ages as well as nutrition and chiropractic services. In addition, Wheeler Clinic has a therapeutic special education day school in Plainville for students in kindergarten through age 21 from 60 different school districts across the state. It is a provider of foster care services in the state, particularly in the Waterbury area, among many other services. Wheeler Clinic's Basic Needs Fund assists with additional financial support for specific, non-reimbursable patient needs.

"All of our primary care teams—both the pediatric and the adult medical teams—have a behavioral health consultant attached to the team who is a licensed

clinician and does not carry a caseload or have scheduled appointments. The floating behavioral health consultant can be there when the clinicians need them. There continues to be a stigma for patients seeking behavioral health where they wouldn't walk in for that service. Today, when a patient comes in, they may be coming in for an annual physical, psychiatry appointment or a dental cleaning," explained Sabrina Trocchi, Ph.D., MPA, president and CEO.

"We implement tools without the stigma of feeling like there is something 'wrong' with them," said Trocchi. "Their follow-up appointments are also with primary care provider, not the behavioral consultant,

Mott Corporation employees, known as Wheeler's Mott Health Ambassadors, have volunteered since 2016 to provide support for Wheeler and community events, such as conversations about addiction, recovery walks, toy drives, packaging basic needs items and more.



who may be brought in again if needed. Immediate care is implemented; it is much more effective with individuals who wouldn't schedule a separate behavioral health appointment. If we feel a higher level of intervention is needed, we will try and support that patient to engage in specialty behavioral health."

As Wheeler Clinic integrated more services into their model, they started to identify the barriers that their patients had to gain access to care, said Trocchi. Approximately 9 years ago, they began identifying and addressing these issues with the adult population at several sites when the patients were asked about the last time they saw their practitioners. Of those surveyed, 60% to 75% reported not having a primary care provider, or not feeling respected or welcomed at medical offices as barriers. If they had an issue, they went to the emergency room, which could result in not getting the appropriate level of care.

"It is hard to present to follow up with care when you don't have access to transportation, or when you haven't had a meal," said Trocchi. With the increase from 600 patients the first year to over 21,000 patients across five centers today, there was a high need for additional help. The organization began identifying services and supports that could be implemented that were not reimbursable by Medicaid or other programs that would increase access for patients to better their health. Wheeler Clinic's Basic Needs Fund was created to bring fundraising and donations to help them.

The fund goes where it is needed. Patients, based on where they live, may only be able to get to the center by bus. That can be a barrier with the hardship of coming to an appointment with multiple children and strollers, bus transfers and weather conditions, Trocchi explained. When a parent can't make it because of that, the funds may be used for Uber Health or other taxis services to bring them to the appointment and back home. Staff at the Wheeler Clinic health centers work hard with patients to utilize the most appropriate level of care. If a patient needs to be seen the same day, there is a barrier as Medicaid requires 48 hours to arrange medical transportation. Instead, the patient may go to the ER. In those instances, the staff will arrange for taxis from the fund.

Other examples include providing funds to purchase toiletries, clothing and more for a family who lost all of their personal items in a fire. When a patient had her cellphone stolen at a shelter, staff purchased a low-priced phone for her to be able to coordinate care when she did not qualify for other assistance programs to receive a phone. When a student is graduating and pursuing college or a technical school, they may need help purchasing equipment needed to start school or a basic laptop. In the winter months, they noticed that patients were coming in on very cold days without coats, scarves, gloves and hats. Funds were used to purchase cold-weather gear.

Overwhelmingly, food security issues in Wheeler Clinic's communities are a barrier for many of their patients. The funds are utilized to purchase groceries for families and patients in their programs. When a family experiencing financial hardship couldn't afford the oil needed to heat their apartment, the fund was used to purchase 100 gallons for them. Another patient in recovery who couldn't afford work boots for a new construction job received a new pair so he could start on his first day.

The Wheeler Annual Golf Classic was started in 1986 by a group of business leaders and companies to raise money for behavioral health and community-based services for children and adolescents. Proceeds from the annual golf tournament, being held this year on September 18 in Farmington, are directly linked to the basic needs program as are several mass distribution mailing, email and social media campaigns highlighting the ways the basic needs fund is utilized and the trends Wheeler Clinic is seeing.

"When we are engaging with someone in behavioral health services and primary care, and hunger is on their mind, you can't work with them on the other areas before addressing those needs," Trocchi said. Wheeler's Basic Needs Fund helps staff solve environmental and social issues that can affect a patient's health and well-being. "Our staff has flexibility in how they utilize the funds. The funds are about, 'What do you need to be healthier and to succeed?'"

Learn more at wheelerclinic.org/donors.