

Jan. 21, 2011

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Grand opening of expanded North Port Health Center set Feb. 2

The grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony of the newly renovated and expanded North Port Health Center will be held at 10 a.m. Wednesday, Feb. 2, at the facility, 6950 Outreach Way, North Port.

Representatives of the Sarasota County Commission, the North Port City Commission, the Sarasota County Health Department, the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice and the Florida House of Representatives are among those scheduled to speak.

The event is open to the public and also will feature informational displays and exhibits, tours of the facility and refreshments.

The renovated state-of-the-art facility was expanded from 6,870 to 12,145 square feet, increasing the number of exam rooms from eight to 18 and the number of dental treatment rooms from three to five. There is also meeting room space for educational programs on tobacco cessation and other important issues that impact health and well-being.

Currently, the Sarasota County Health Department provides primary care to adults and children, women's health care, immunizations and other personal health services to approximately 6,500 area residents at this location. Health Department officials anticipate that the renovated center will ultimately serve as the primary care home for 15,000 patients, with the number of patient visits increasing from the current 12,000 to 35,000 annually. The increase in service capacity at this location is well-timed, according to local health officials, since the U.S. Census Bureau 2009 American Community Survey data indicates that 27 percent of Sarasota County's population is uninsured, compared to the national average of 17.8 percent.

A new physician, another part-time dentist and additional support staff members recently joined the health care team at this location. The expanded center opened for services on Jan. 10.

The center is expected to be certified as a "green" building with a silver designation under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The LEED features include:

- solar hot water
- energy-efficient outdoor lighting and sensor-driven indoor lighting
- Florida-friendly landscaping
- low-volume plumbing fixtures
- high-efficiency chilled water air conditioning system.

The North Port Health Center was originally conceived by the North Port Community Health Action Team, a group of concerned resident volunteers and community agency representatives who were engaged in studying the health needs of North Port residents. Their input served as a springboard for the North Port Health and Family Service Center, which was an integration of health and human services operated by the Senior Friendship Center. As the demand for health services increased, the city of North Port funded the Family Service Center, which allowed for the relocation of social services and other human services to a larger building across the street.

In 2008, the Sarasota County Health Department received funding to establish the health center as a federally qualified health center (FQHC). The federal funding provides greater flexibility in how services are provided, allowing the health center to serve people in North Port and in neighboring Port Charlotte.

In Sept. 2009, the North Port facility was purchased by Sarasota County from the Senior Friendship Center, a nonprofit corporation, so it could be renovated and expanded to meet the growing health care needs of North Port and Charlotte County area residents as a federally qualified health center. While construction was under way starting in July 2010, the health services were temporarily relocated to the Family Service Center's second floor.

The \$1.8 million construction project was funded by the county's infrastructure surtax (penny sales tax), a federal grant administered through the Health Resources and Services Administration and a grant from the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice. DeAngelis Diamond Construction Inc. of Charlotte County was the contractor.

Under a separate project with the Florida Department of Health, a 2,200-square-foot education and training facility was added. It is available for community events and meetings.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, call 941-861-3820. Details about eligibility for Sarasota County Health Department clinic services and the scope of services provided at North Port Health Center are available online at www.sarasotahealth.org or by calling 941-861-3825.

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