

# Dental center filling a need

New CHP facility already has 4- to 6-month wait list

BY HEATHER BELLOW  
*The Berkshire Eagle*

**GREAT BARRINGTON** — Dental care is about more than toothaches — it's "essential" to health care, according to Community Health Programs officials.

Which is why CHP's new Family Dental Center, which opened last month off Stockbridge Road, is filling an important, growing need in the community and critical to the overall health of patients, according to Executive Director Bethany Kieley.

While CHP's expansion is narrowing a particularly dire care gap for residents with MassHealth's Medicaid insurance, more dentists and hygienists are needed to serve more people.

The waiting list is around four to six months long for new patients at the facility. But emergency walk-ins are accepted.

At a tour on Tuesday at the new dental center, which is adjacent to the medical offices, Kieley said the next project is to hire more dentists and hygienists to open up care for more people.

As part of its larger expansion into Adams and North Adams, CHP converted the administrative

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# Dental

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offices at its Great Barrington headquarters into what one of the center's two dentists, Dr. Lina Bermudez, said is a "state of the art" facility. It features a panoramic X-ray machine as well as a hand-held X-ray device, and other modern equipment in light-filled rooms.

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It also allows payments on a sliding scale, meaning that "no one is turned away for dental care," said Bermudez, speaking at the event.

While giving a tour of the new facility, Bermudez noted that, while the waiting list is long, staff will take emergency walk-in patients.

The center offers all dental services, from prevention to extractions. Bermudez said her youngest patient is 6 months, the oldest is 98. The second dentist here is Dr. Natalia Petrushenka.

Money for this \$1.7 million dental expansion came from two public sources: \$1.6 million from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, as well as \$150,000 from Great Barrington's federal pandemic relief funds, known as American Rescue Plan Act — or ARPA.

CHP's dental offices are one of the few that will accept children on MassHealth. The nonprofit's other dental centers are in Pittsfield, North Adams and Adams. The organization, which also runs medical centers in four different towns, also uses mobile medical and dental vans to reach residents around the county.

The expansion is part of an initiative begun several years ago, amid growing alarm over dental care neglected in part due to the dentist shortage for people enrolled in Medicaid.

"As many as four in 10 Medicaid enrollees in the Berkshires lack a dental provider, according to data from the state and CHP," The Eagle reported in 2022, in a story about this issue. "That's about 10,000 people."

Great Barrington's previous dental center downtown closed several years ago when the building was purchased by a developer. The



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

**Above:** Visitors take a tour of the state-of-the-art facilities CHP's new family dental center in Great Barrington at its Stockbridge Road headquarters. **Below:** Dr. Lina Bermudez, a dentist with CHP, speaks at a ceremony celebrating CHP's new family dental clinic in Great Barrington.



dentists worked at the other CHP offices in the county. Now they are back.

And back in style. The office is high tech, with a layout that Bermudez and other staff say flows well for the way a dental practice works.

"It's overwhelmingly nice," said dental assistant Donna Jarvis. "It makes things a lot more efficient."

It's also easier for South County residents who previously were traveling north for care, said Kimberly Kehl, the lead receptionist at the new office. Although, patients are also coming here from North County towns as they follow their dentists to the new office. The expansion is making a difference, she said, in how residents are feeling.

"I think they're feeling like their voice was heard," Kehl said, "that they know that there was a need, and that CHP is actively trying to get more providers and see as

many patients as we can."

Local and state officials said the expansion is a boon to a county where it is nearly impossible to find a doctor or dentist — especially as a new patient.

Select Board Chair Stephen Bannon, who spoke at the event, told The Eagle that he knows someone who could not find a dentist to fix a loose cavity and "developed an infection" as a result. The waitlist for that dentist was six months, Bannon said.

The problem of too few providers is one that has frustrated state Rep. William "Smitty" Pignatelli, D-Lenox, for years. Pignatelli likes to tell the story of a Tufts University School of Dental Medicine graduate who said he couldn't spend up to \$2 million to open a practice in the Berkshires, only to make "pennies on the dollar" due to a high population on Medicaid, and low reimbursements for care.

He said the federal and state governments need to "reevaluate" this "unfair" reimbursement system to prevent this suffering among citizens.

"It should be equal access across the board," Pignatelli said, given that, "good oral health is good overall health."

That CHP is a federally designated health care provider, he noted, makes it eligible for higher reimbursements and more sustainability.

"It's good," Pignatelli said, "that CHP is stepping up."

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