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Health agency hails new beginning

Blue Ridge breaks ground on building and a better future

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On Friday, staff and board members of Blue Ridge Community Health Services broke ground for construction of the first phase of a new building. The facility is more than just much-needed space; it also symbolizes a new chapter for the organization.

In 2003, the agency mortgaged a

building in order to make payroll. "That represented the low point," said Dan Akers, president of the BRCHS Foundation board. "The board was reshuffled."

A new executive director, John Snow, was brought in with the mission to turn around the organization. It was a four- to five-year process, Akers explained. Since 2004, BRCHS has been in the black. Jennifer Henderson came on board as the new executive officer in 2007 with the promise of a new building.

"I think you have to acknowledge your past before you move

into the future," Akers said.

"Wherever there are people, there is a need for health care," Henderson said. "We seek out where there are needs and how we can help this need in the community."

Bustling agency

In 2009, more than 16,000 people called BRCHS their medical home. Last year, the organization had 50,000 visits. More than 63 percent of those patients were uninsured.

"We believe every person should have an opportunity for good

health, and it should be offered in a good, clean space," Henderson said.

The agency offers family practice, pediatric medicine, dental services, school-based health centers, mental health counseling and psychiatry. In May, it opened an on-site pharmacy for Blue Ridge clients, and it offers prescriptions at a significant discount.

The center is at the corner of Howard Gap Road and Highway 64. In the winter, the old farmhouse that housed the family prac-

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tice services was torn down.

The agency started as a migrant clinic in 1964. Now, it serves anyone needing health care in the community.

According to its website, "our goal is to provide high quality and affordable medical, dental and mental health care as well as promote health awareness/education."

"Our role is even more important than ever," Henderson said.

The agency also works

with community partners to offer health care. With Mainstay, the local agency helping victims of domestic abuse, Blue Ridge offers women coming into the shelter physicals for themselves and their children.

"We send everybody over there now," said Tanya Blackford, executive direc-

tor of Mainstay. "It's a great place to be served medically. They do physicals for our clients and offer mental health services."

The school-based health centers currently are offered in three Henderson County schools: Bruce Drysdale Elementary, Apple Valley Middle and North Henderson High. A fourth will open in August at Hillandale Elementary. David Jones, associate superintendent, said the school system would be happy to open more centers when funding allows.

"Those health centers provide not just physical health, but also mental health, which has been a plus," Jones added.

The schools and Blue Ridge are discussing whether dental care can be introduced at the schools, he said, especially in the elementary schools, because of the great need.

"Blue Ridge has just been a tremendous partner with the Henderson County Public Schools, and their can-do attitude is what we need so we can help kids," he added.

Blue Ridge also works closely with the Free Clinics of Henderson County, which offers emergency health care services to people in the community. It also works with the Department of Social Services and the Children & Family Resource Center.

The new facility

The new, 27,000-square-foot building will be completed in two phases. The first is expected to be done by June 2011. The new facility will cost \$5 million, and \$2 million of that still needs to be raised within the community.

"For this project to be successful, it really has to be a community event,"

Kirkland said.

The former family medicine building consisted of trailers and a 60-year-old farmhouse which had several structural and environmental safety concerns, including black mold and water damage. The building was abandoned in July 2009, and the practices have been either cramped in existing spaces or using donated spaces.

"We are a medical home to thousands of people, but we're a medical home without a home," Henderson said.

Already, \$300,000 has poured in from the board of directors, staff donations and the James H. Cummings Foundation.

"It's as much about an awareness campaign as anything," Kirkland said.

The facility will allow for an expansion of more than 15 medical providers.

More than 4,000 new patients will be helped each year. During the construction, 104 jobs will be added to the county, providing \$3.7 million in income to the county.

After the project, 23 permanent jobs will be added, providing an estimated \$1.2 million in income, according to Kirkland.

Phase two of the project will be completed as funding allows.

For more information, visit www.brchs.com.