



PEOPLE'S HEALTH & WELLNESS CLINIC

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House Committee on Health Care

Testimony by Daniel Barlow, Executive Director, People's Health & Wellness Clinic

Background

Since 1994, People's Health & Wellness Clinic (PHWC) has provided free healthcare to uninsured and underinsured people in Central Vermont. Services include high quality medical, mental health, and oral health, which are provided at no cost to patients. PHWC also continues to provide extensive case management, referrals, and assistance enrolling in health insurance and financial assistance programs.

As a federally deemed free clinic, PHWC cannot charge for services and depends mostly on grants, donations, and municipal funding. Our annual budget is approximately \$420,000 and we are a small staff - six employees for a total of 3.5 full time positions. A vast majority of our care is provided by a roster of 40 volunteer doctors and nurses who come in once or twice a month to see patients. We also rely heavily on donated equipment and supplies from Central Vermont Medical Center and other healthcare providers in the region.

2022 PHWC patient data:

- PHWC cared for 408 unduplicated patients, 159 of whom were new to the clinic.

- Patients visited the clinic (in person and via telemedicine) for 545 medical visits,
- 285 dental visits,
- 99 mental health visits.
- 73 patients received assistance in enrolling in Medicaid, another health insurance plan, and financial assistance programs.
- Patients came from 62 cities and towns in the region.

Who are our patients?

PHWC provides health care for people who are uninsured or underinsured, and can't afford to pay for needed care, including high deductibles.

- Our patient profile is fairly evenly split between people who identify as female (51%) and those who identify as male (48%).
- In 2021, more than half (55%) of our patients had health insurance, but could not find a PCP or afford OOP costs.
- Half of our patients report having a primary care doctor while the other half do not.

- Most of our patients live in poverty. Nearly a quarter of our patients make less than \$14,000 a year and a vast majority are under 200% of FPL (about \$27,000 a year for a single person).
- One quarter of our patients report that they have delayed care because of lack of access to a doctor.
- Many of our patients are the working poor: 37% work full or part time while only 16% are unemployed.

PHWC was originally founded to serve the uninsured, but we are increasingly seeing more patients who have health insurance, but cannot access healthcare.

In 2007, 90% of PHWC patients were uninsured; last year more than half our patients were on a private or public health insurance plan, but came to us because they could not find a primary care provider or afford the out of pocket costs.

Because of this demographic change, PHWC is in the process of changing our Mission Statement to reflect that our patients do not have “adequate” access to healthcare, as opposed to focusing on their health insurance status.

Dental hygiene

The Clinic’s oral healthcare program continues to grow in popularity and demand, due partly to a lack of dental insurance or available area dentists. Nearly half of the patients in 2022 saw our dental hygienist for cleanings, x-rays, maintenance, and referrals for more complicated procedures, including extractions and root canals.

There is a growing oral healthcare crisis in Vermont brought on by the limits of existing dental insurance programs, a lack of new dentists, and providers who cannot afford to take on more Medicaid patients.

- PHWC is seeing an influx of new patients who have delayed oral healthcare for years because it is unaffordable or out of reach.
- We have few providers to refer patients to because many dentists are not accepting new patients or will not accept new Medicaid patients because of the low reimbursement rate.
- The cost of restoration is out of reach for our patients and Vermont is one of 40 states that does not cover the cost of dentures for adult Medicaid patients.

“The masks are coming off and people are realizing they can no longer hide the condition of their teeth. These are people who want to go out there and get jobs, but they think they will not be hired because of the state of their teeth. Our patients just cannot afford the \$2,400 it would cost to get a decent pair of dentures.”

- Joanne Puente, dental hygienist and PHWC oral case manager

Thank you for your time and service to the state of Vermont.

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