



New Teen Health Center a hit with Muskegon students

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By Lynn Moore | The Muskegon Chronicle

It was 10:30 a.m. Thursday, and Muskegon High School's new Teen Health Center already had treated five students.

The day started even before the health center officially opened its doors at 7:45. A student walking to school had been hit by a car, and so at 7:30 a.m., he was ushered into the health center, checked out and sent to be examined at Mercy Health Partners' emergency room.

Later came a student asking for a pregnancy test. Another student sought testing for a sexually transmitted disease. A fourth arrived with a sore throat. And a young athlete stopped in for a sports physical.



Chronicle/Ken Stevens

Dental assistant Julie Grevious works to prepare a Muskegon High School student for a dental X-ray during school hours in the new Teen Health Center on campus on Wednesday. Dental work is available for patients on Wednesdays. Other medical needs are accessible every weekday. The facility opened in November.

Students seeking relief for everything from depression to toothaches are finding it at the Muskegon Teen Health Center, operated on the high school campus by the Hackley Community Care Center since Nov. 17.

"We've been busy, busy," said Linda Juarez, executive director of the HCCC, which operates a large medical and dental clinic at 2700 Baker in Muskegon Heights.

For seven years, Juarez dreamed of opening a school-based health clinic. In the spring of 2009, she said she felt the timing was right to move forward aggressively with fundraising. Within a year she had enough backing to approach Muskegon school officials who gave the go-ahead to establish the health center in two rarely-used classrooms in the high school's freshman wing, known as the "J Building."

Generous community donors and federal grants contributed \$380,000 to turn the space into a modern medical and dental center complete with two exam rooms, two dental chairs, digital

IF YOU GO

What: The Muskegon Teen Health Center, offering medical, dental and mental health services.

Where: Muskegon High School, near the corner of Fifth Street and Southern Avenue.

Who: The center serves area young people ages 10 to 21.

dental X-rays, electronic medical records and a spacious waiting area.

“My concern was if we build it, will they come?” Juarez said.

“And they certainly have come.”

In the first 16 days of operation, the clinic served 83 medical patients. Another 25 dental patients were seen in December.

Freshman Treasure Crenshaw said she was glad the health center was there for her recently when she developed a pounding headache in class. Feeling light-headed, she made her way to the health center and nurse Lisa Metcalf, who gave her some mothering and sent her home.

Metcalf left her job as a cardiac nurse for Mercy Health Partners to work at the Teen Health Center, where she counsels, lectures, nurtures and treats its young patients.

“I was looking for more,” Metcalf said in explaining why she left a hospital career that included working as a surgical and emergency room nurse.

Also caring for the students are two physician assistants from HCCC. An HCCC dentist is filling in until a dentist arrives from the Federal Service Corps and can increase days of dental service from the current one day a week.

Overseeing day-to-day operations at the health center is Judy Pruum, an 18-year HCCC employee who has been running nonclinical health centers at Muskegon’s Bunker and Steele middle schools to encourage healthy habits and lifestyle choices. Pruum said when hiring a registered nurse, she was looking for someone “who has a passion for kids — who sees this as more of a mission.”

Metcalf is a straight-shooter with a passion for kids who says she won’t “sugar coat” the dangers of unprotected sex, smoking or substance abuse. She believes the health center can play a critical role in stopping the spread of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancies that plague young people.

When asked what the Teen Health Center is seeing, Metcalf, without hesitating, responded “lots of” sexually transmitted infections.

Hours: 7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays; noon to 6 p.m. Wednesdays. Walk-ins are welcome, but only Muskegon High students can visit before 3 p.m.

Call: 733-6680 to schedule an appointment or for more information.

Video



Enlarge

Ken Stevens | The Muskegon Chronicle

Dental hygienist Lindsey Bolduc works with a computer after cleaning the teeth of a Muskegon High School student during school hours in the new Teen Health Center on campus on Wednesday, January 12, 2010. Dental work is available for patients on Wednesdays. Other medical needs are accessible every weekday. The facility opened in November. (Muskegon Chronicle/Ken Stevens) Photo available for sale, please call 231-725-6368.

Teen Health Center gallery (10 photos)

"They are afraid to talk to their parents," Metcalf said.

At the Teen Health Center, teens 14 and older can be tested and treated for sexually transmitted infections without their parents knowing. Metcalf closely guards the confidentiality of her patients, as state law dictates, refusing even to confirm to parents that their children visited the health center.

Girls can receive confidential pregnancy testing, counseling and prenatal care. Students also can receive information on birth control and where to get it since the health center can't distribute birth control.

"I disagree with the state law of not being able to dispense birth control," Metcalf said. "We can stop (teen pregnancy) here."

About 12 percent of girls at Muskegon High are pregnant or have children, Juarez has said.

Freshman Katavious Vale called the teen pregnancy problem at his school "outrageous."

"I know a lot of teens are getting pregnant," Vale said. "They think it's cool."

As for the health center, Vale said "it's a good thing," especially for those who can't afford to see a doctor.

Services at the health center are provided on a sliding-fee scale for students who don't have private insurance or Medicaid. Because of its role in caring for under-served patients, the HCCC is "federally-qualified" to receive higher Medicaid payments than other providers.

Juarez estimates the center will lose about \$75,000 the first year, but will reduce those losses "as we get our foot in the door." Total first-year operating costs are estimated at \$923,000.

Muskegon High Senior José Rodriguez said he recently got health insurance, but prior to that hadn't seen a doctor for about five years and wishes the health center had been there for him then.

The health center is open to anyone between the ages of 10 and 21. Those who aren't students at Muskegon High can visit the center, which has an outside entrance, after 3 p.m. when school lets out.

"I think it's really convenient for kids who don't have health insurance," Rodriguez said. "And parents don't have to take time out of their day to take kids to the doctor."

The health center shares space with Muskegon's Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, a collaborative effort of the school district and other community services to combat violence, substance abuse, behavioral and mental health issues.

Lisa Sias of Community Mental Health has an office at the health center where she provides mental health counseling to teens. She said she's seen many teens suffering from grief, anger issues and depression.

"They just walk in and say 'I need help,'" Sias said.

Students can visit the center for mental health counseling 14 times before they need consent from their parents, Metcalf said.

"A lot of them are just distraught," she said.

Juarez said she would like to replicate the health center at another high school, possibly in Muskegon Heights. She also has been talking with officials in Fruitport, who have discussed the possibility of a health center for all students, from kindergarten through 12th grade.

"Health care and education, we were like aliens to one another," Juarez said. "We didn't speak the same language; we were totally different institutions. In the last six years we've been beginning to communicate more.

"Being an adolescent is really, really hard, so we'll do anything we can to help."

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