

HEALTH CARE ON A MISSION

LAKE SUPERIOR COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER WILL OPEN A STATE-OF-THE ART FACILITY IN SUPERIOR AND CELEBRATE 50 YEARS OF SERVICE WITH A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY ACCESS

In early 2022, the Lake Superior Community Health Center – a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization – will open its new, expanded health care facility in Superior's East End neighborhood at the former Super One Foods site. Improving access to quality health care for all is LSCHC's mission. And in conversation with CEO Jessie Peterson, she quickly homes in on the word she feels is most important in LSCHC's mission statement – access.

"We want to make sure that our communities know we're here, and that they know the services they can receive from us," she said.

As a community health care provider, LSCHC provides family medicine, dentistry, behavioral health and chiropractic services. Its emphasis is on patient care foremost, but understanding the needs of the community it serves is a close second. "Our board of directors is made up of at least 51 percent patient board members," Peterson explained. "That forces us to stay true to our mission and to make sure that we are looking at our opportunities, our strategy and our governance from a patient perspective."

One foundational aspect of the community health center movement is to respond to community needs with an eye on addressing gaps that exist in the provision of care. And as LSCHC's chief operating officer, Lee Homan knows a lot about serving health care needs in the Twin Ports.

"When you look at the Twin Ports, we live in a relatively medically saturated market, but gaps in care remain," said Homan. "One of the greatest things that a facility like this will do is put us on the map in that regard [to address health care gaps]. It's an opportunity for us to have a conversation about the work that we're doing and the needs that we can help the community meet."

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LSCHC also offers individual therapy, coupled with group therapy, and specialized alcohol and other drug counselors in addition to the behavioral health team. This robust program is supported and funded by the State of Wisconsin. Although LSCHC is based in Superior, Peterson points out that it serves rural Douglas County as well. "We have folks who come from many of the smaller surrounding communities, and we also have behavioral health therapists out in the school districts, for example, as far out as Maple," she said.

THE COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER MOVEMENT

The community health center movement actually evolved from the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement, Peterson noted, by proponents who believed health care should be a human right and that everybody deserves the opportunity to be healthy. "Community health centers were born of that movement and have received bipartisan support since the 1960s, which is remarkable in this day and age," said Peterson.

Over the years, LSCHC grew and expanded, eventually becoming a federally qualified health center (FQHC), which means it receives a base grant from the federal government to help offset the cost of uncompensated care. As an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Health Resources and Services Administration provides funding for community health centers like LSCHC. There are approximately 1,400 community health centers nationwide that collectively serve more than 30 million patients.

LSCHC'S HISTORY OF GROWTH

This nonprofit's roots date back to 1972, when it was launched as the Duluth Community Health Center, a free clinic operating from the basement of Sacred Heart Church in the city's Central Hillside neighborhood. It relocated a year later to the site of a former Duluth grocery store at 2 E. Fifth St. In 1991, it opened its Health Care Access Office, and two years later it became a Federally-Qualified Health Center.

By 2000, more growth occurred when the organization received its first Federal Section 330 grant funding, changed its name to Lake Superior Community Health Center and launched services at 1419 Hill Ave. in Superior. Additional changes occurred in 2005, when the practice in Superior

relocated to 3600 Tower Ave., where dental services were initiated, and the practice in Duluth relocated to 4325 Grand Ave. Dental services expanded in Duluth in 2009.

LSCHC became Health Care Home Certified by the Minnesota Department of Health in 2013 at both the Superior and Duluth practice locations and has maintained certification ever since. This certification highlights LSCHC's ability to provide care coordination and collaboration between community resources and the team of clinicians needed to support the "whole person care" approach.

LSCHC opened a third practice location in Superior at 1500 N. 34th St., Ste. 200, in 2018 to provide additional behavioral health services as well as outpatient substance abuse services (this office will be closed, since these services will now be provided at the new facility in Superior's East End). In 2020, it purchased a building at 210 Third St. in Carlton, Minnesota, to open a dental practice serving patients in Carlton County and the surrounding area, and also opened a chiropractic office in Duluth at 4602 Grand Ave., Ste. 1000.

For urgent needs after hours, LSCHC provides two phone numbers – a Nurse Care Line and a Mental Health Crisis Line.

Since both Wisconsin and Minnesota rely upon community health centers as key to statewide COVID-19 vaccination efforts, LSCHC has been providing COVID testing since early 2020 and vaccinations since they were made available in January 2021.

HOW THE MODEL WORKS

"What I'm really proud about, and what I believe sets community health centers apart, is that we provide integrated health care," said Peterson. "We provide our services, whenever we're able, under one roof." Certain staff members referred to as "navigators" help patients navigate their health care options, especially those with barriers such as transportation, hunger or literacy.

"Being able to meet all of a patient's health care needs in one setting, sometimes in one day, is really, really beneficial," Peterson said. "I love that our providers work together and interdepartmentally to make sure their patients are getting the comprehensive treatment they need."

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LAKE SUPERIOR COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

Nationwide, community health centers tend to be the best-kept secret in town, and the Twin Ports is no different, Homan added, explaining that LSCHC provides a wide breadth of high-quality services. "Despite our best efforts, too often, folks don't know about us until they need us. For example, if you lose

your job for whatever reason, the health insurance that came with it is usually lost, too. Often, in those cases, maybe you find out from a friend that they were able to access care at our facility," he said. "But the reality is that we're open to anybody and everybody, with a sliding fee scale for those who need it."

LSCHC accepts most insurance, including Medical Assistance, Medicare and Badgercare. It's one of the major health care providers in the Twin Ports area, annually serving more than 10,000 patients who live in Douglas County, Wisconsin, and St. Louis County, Minnesota. Within its combined area of coverage, LSCHC is budgeted for 125 employees, many of whom are based at the Superior location.

"I think what really sets our providers, our support team and all of our staff apart is that they're making a competitive salary – but they're also choosing to provide their talents to patients who might not otherwise have an option for care, were it not for our team," Peterson said. "All of our providers across all of our service lines are very mission-oriented, very driven."

NEW SUPERIOR LOCATION PROVIDES EXPANDED SERVICES

With the lease running out on its 3600 Tower Ave. location, Lake Superior Community Health Center is making the move into Superior's East End neighborhood. In the hunt for a new location, the LSCHC staff had several options, from building new to modifying existing locations, before

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deciding on the former Super One site at 2222 E. Fifth St. "It was really open in the inside," said Peterson. "We weren't knocking a lot of walls down; it was a pretty clean slate."

"I think the reason we ended up picking this location over some of the other locations that we were looking at is that it had space for us to be able to expand – but also because it really feels like we're a part of the neighborhood," Homan said of the decision to renovate and occupy the former Super One Foods. "A lot of what we try to do is make ourselves accessible for the people who need us most. By picking a location that's in the neighborhood that we're in, and on a bus line, we felt like it accomplishes all those goals."

In response to community need, it is also adding imaging and chiropractic care at its new state-of-the-art Superior location. "We found that our patients were dealing with a lot of acute and chronic pain. The chiropractic service will be a great addition to help our chronic pain patients," Homan said. "Again, this came out of us listening to needs from our patients and the needs of

the community and making an intentional effort to respond."

The move to the East End not only brings all of the organization's services under one roof; it also allows for the much-anticipated expansion of services, Peterson noted: "We're going from 18,000 to 25,000 square feet, we're going from five exam rooms to 13 for family medicine for adults and children, and we're going from nine dental operatories to 12 dental operatories." She also said dental care comprises the highest volume of services, since many private dental practices don't accept Medicaid. Because of LSCHC's unique model of care, it accepts dental patients with and without insurance.

Providing behavioral health services has always been a core tenet of LSCHC services, and the new Superior location will have expanded office space for behavioral health patients. "I think this is going to represent a very significant expansion in the availability of our services for folks in Superior and in broader Douglas County," Peterson said.

RENOVATION PROJECT TAPS TWIN PORTS AREA BUSINESS EXPERTISE

The DSGW Architects firm was chosen to design the space. Principal Architect Rebecca Lewis, FAIA, FACHA, the director of DSGW's Health Care Studio, presented a variety of designs for the team at LSCHC to review.

"The client's care approach for patients is what drives any design," said Lewis, who is a Fellow with the American College of Healthcare Architects. "If you look at their mission statement, this particular client is very patient centered, very family focused, community focused." In this case, she noted, the selected design is a simple flower shape.

The flower design is very simple, but extremely functional, she added. In this model, the patient is at the center and then the departments revolve around them, like a flower. Lewis explained that the patient really only has to find one thing, and that's the front door. Once inside, they are greeted and welcomed into the practice before being directed to a common patient waiting area. Lewis says that providing a calm, soothing patient experience is a trending architectural approach known as trauma informed design, or TiD.

"It is bringing the care to the patient, rather than the patient to care," Lewis said. "It's a really wonderful approach to meeting that mission statement."

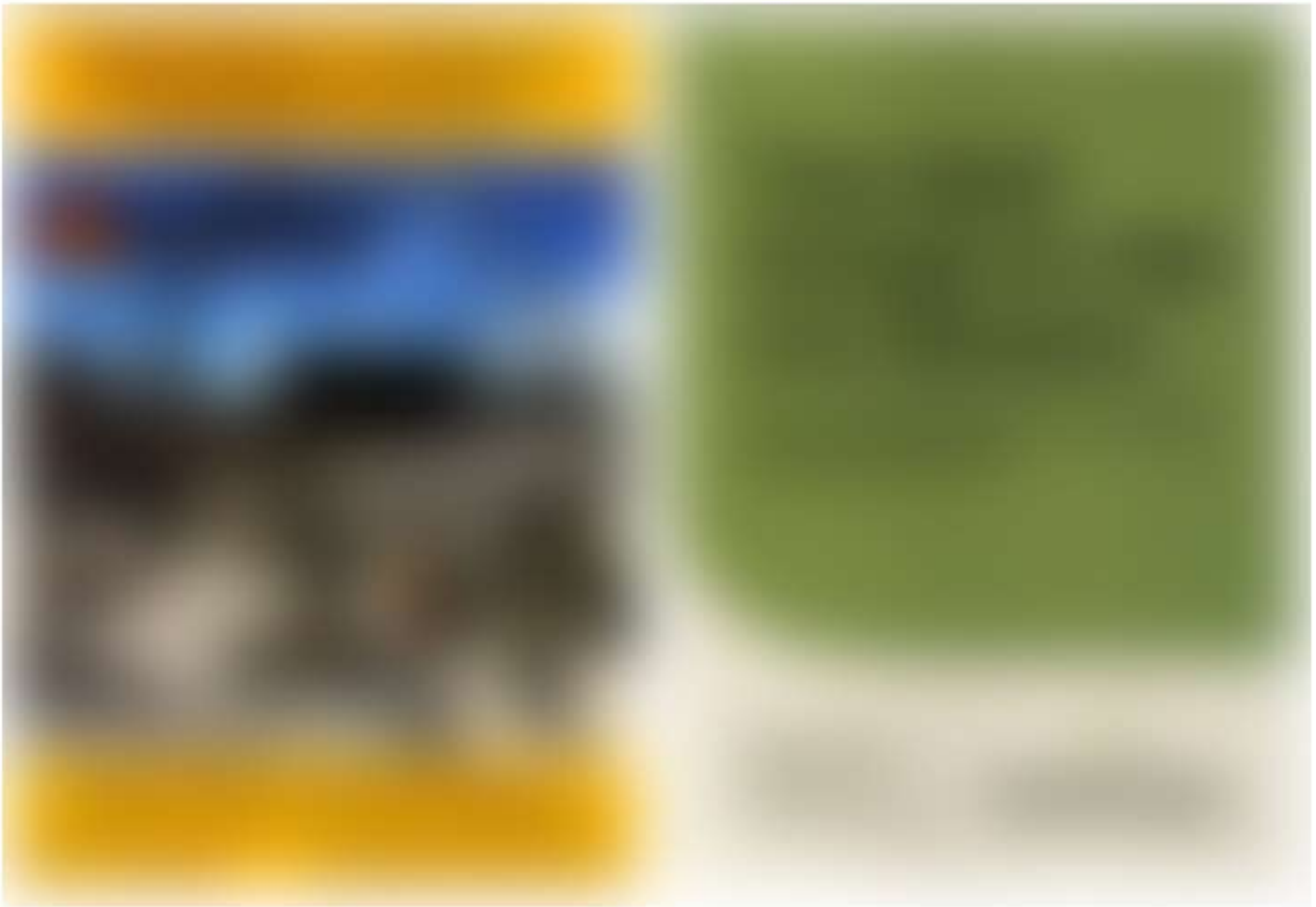
Practitioners of this design model, as explained on the traumainformeddesign.com website, describe it as "a design process for the built environment based on trauma-informed care principles. All decisions about the physical environment must be filtered through the overlapping lenses of psychology, neuroscience, physiology and cultural factors. The intent is to create uniquely-designed spaces where all users feel a sense of safety (both real and perceived), respect, connection and community, control, dignity and joy. Each TiD environment should aim to specifically meet the unique needs of the intended users, recognizing that some helpful and healing design elements may look different for different populations."

By late April, with the TiD design accepted, Stack Brothers of Superior was hired as the project's general contractor, working with the Duluth-based project management firm ICS. "They're strongly

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– SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER NATHAN NORTAN – ICS







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– PRINCIPAL REBECCA LEWIS – DSGW ARCHITECTS

PHOTO COURTESY OF DSGW

tied into this project as the general contractor; they're obviously local," said Senior Project Manager Nathan Norton of ICS. "Anytime you're working with a community like this, it's important to try to get as many local contractors involved as possible. Belknap Plumbing is one of them that's directly local."

As the project manager, Norton works directly with LSCHC's internal project manager, Tanya Boudreau, to ensure that LSCHC's needs are being met throughout the construction phase. "She's one of the quickest responding clients I've ever worked with," Norton said. "There are a lot of moving parts on this project. She's working with many different directors – behavioral health, dental, the clinic side of things."

Boudreau is new to her current position, but has been with LSCHC for 12 years, previously serving as the health information tech-

nology manager. She's excited about her new role and passionate about expanding the organization's capabilities and services.

"I really like working so closely and supporting the other local businesses, like Stack Brothers Mechanical, Belknap Plumbing, DSGW, Independence Heating, Northland Consulting and Obernel Engineering," Boudreau said. "I love going on-site and learning everything that they do from week to week and seeing the progress of the construction. We're just excited for the final project to be over and available for all of the patients that we serve in the community."



2022 MARKS 50 YEARS OF SERVING THE COMMUNITY

"2022 will be our 50th anniversary, which is amazing," Peterson noted, adding that she is very proud of her team for their resiliency, especially over the past year-and-a-half. "Everybody has banded together. We have thought of creative solutions, and are just bringing that dedication and making sure that our patients know we're here for them."


As the final stages of the project draw to a conclusion, Peterson can see the vision for the new Superior location coming to life. A new feature LSCHC plans to offer to promote community health is a patient pantry with food, dry goods, hygiene products, cleaning products, clothes and books – an open space for people to take what they need and for the practice to share. "We want this to be a safe, welcoming place for our current patients and for new patients to come in and find us," Peterson said.

Everyone is welcome at the Lake Superior Community Health Center. Stop in during



its open house early next year, see what it offers, meet with one of its navigators or chat with the front desk employees. Whether you're a patient or not, the staff encourages you to visit the new facility to learn more about what it provides for the community.

"Across all of our services, we really do provide an excellent quality of care,"

Homan said. "For people who don't want to navigate a larger system, or those looking for more of a family feel from their health care providers or more comprehensive services, those are things we can offer." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.