

# Healthy growth in downtown Lynn

By Bridget Turcotte / The Daily Item | Posted: Monday, October 5, 2015 3:00 am

LYNN — What began as a small mental-health clinic in 1971 has since grown into a community health center that offers primary-care services, integrated with mental-health care.

And over the years, the Lynn Community Health Center has also largely become a teaching medical center.

With its expansion, the center has continued to focus on mental health and integrated care, with the recognition that very often, being mentally unwell can go hand-in-hand with being physically unwell. Integrated care allows primary-care physicians and mental- and behavioral-health specialists to work together to treat patients on individual needs.

This environment, paired with the sheer diversity of the city, provides a unique learning experience for students going to school in different medical fields, according to Jessica Sussman, who is working in a post-doctoral fellowship in the behavioral health department and expects to become licensed in January.

“People in the past would have been more likely to shy away (from accessing behavioral health care), but because we work directly with primary care, and it’s integrated, they are receiving care sooner rather than later,” she said. “I think they feel more comfortable.

“What I do impacts their physical health,” Sussman said. “I work with multiple providers to collaborate with them. It takes down barriers (and) there’s more transparency. I feel like I’m much more in the loop with patients.”

The behavioral health department has approximately 17 students working to become medical professionals, said Deborah Smith Walsh, who works in community and government relations at the center.

In addition, there are 13 nurse-practitioner students, nine dental students, six pharmacy students, 26 optometry students, and 11 medical students.

“We are a teaching center here,” said Executive Director Lori Abrams Berry. “It’s a big part of what



## The eyes have it

Steve Yoon, an optician at Lynn Community Health Center, shows off an eyeglass-making machine.

we do. Part of our job is to help our staff grow.

“Oftentimes students stay with us,” Berry said.

“(The LCHC) introduces more people to the importance of community health,” said Cindy Steger-Wilson, director of marketing and communications.

The main site is located at 269 Union St., but primary care and other services are also offered at 29 Market Square, 649 Western Ave., 280 Union St., 20 Central Ave., 298 Union St., and locations in surrounding communities.

The center offers services including primary-care medicine, behavioral health, women’s health, family dentistry, eye-care services, school-based health services, specialized care for the elderly, an urgent-care center, diagnostics (which is a collaboration with North Shore Medical Center), pharmacy services, WIC (Women, Infants, And Children) and nutrition services, social and support services, and specialty services.

The health center is the largest provider of primary care in Lynn, said Steger-Wilson. There are about 550 employees, which include 160 licensed medical, behavioral-health, dental, eye-care and pharmacy providers.

“Forty percent of people in Lynn use our services,” said Steger-Wilson. “And of the other 60 percent, about half don’t realize the services that we have.”

The diversity in the patients is something that resonates with the students, she said. The center has medical providers that, combined, speak about 15 different languages.

“Lynn has been a gateway city for years,” said Steger-Wilson. “Every year we have a different panel of refugees. It’s a training opportunity for our students to work with refugees, some of whom are trauma patients.”

“I’ve always wanted to work in this setting,” said Sussman. “The furthest reach goes out to people who would never normally have access to behavioral health care.”

Sussman, who went to William James College for graduate school, said she sees around 35 people on a weekly, biweekly or monthly basis.

“It’s a learning-by-doing model,” she said.

“I get exposed to a lot of overlapping issues, like poverty and cultural barriers,” she added.

“The patients are incredible,” Sussman said. “I hear incredible stories of what people have gone through. Many people are mistreated for a large portion of their lives, and they come in and they let you help them and trust you.”

Many of the dental students come from Boston University, Tufts University and Harvard University.

Eye-care students come from the New England College of Optometry, behavioral-health students come from William James College, which is the center's largest training program, and nursing students come from all over, said Berry.

"Being here has been the first time that I've felt like a dentist," said Helen Yang, who is working at the center for three months as part of the Harvard rotation. "We have a full schedule of seeing patients, it's more than shadowing."

On a good day at another clinical program, Yang said she would see about four patients. However, at the center, she had already seen six before lunchtime.

Yang said she sees patients who have preconceived notions of what it's like to visit a dentist.

"Many people's first dental experience is not for a cleaning," she said. "The only experience they might have with a dentist is to have teeth extracted."

"Going to the dentist can be scary for people," Yang said. "We explain to them that it's also about preventive dentistry. It's about building trust among people."

"It's a mutual teaching process," she said. "They are teaching me how to manage teaching patients who have never been to a dentist, and I'm teaching them about dental at home, things like how to properly floss or that you're supposed to be flossing regularly to avoid problems."

Yang said working at the clinic has been a positive experience.

"I see myself working in a community-health setting," she said. "It's food for thought. Maybe someday I'll want to open my own clinic and use what I've learned here."