



These health centers provide care to 20% in RI

By Merrill Thomas

National Health Center Week is a time to celebrate the work of 325,000 dedicated community health care workers who collectively care for 52 million people across the country. While we celebrate this special week from Aug. 2-8, it is important to recognize the impact made every day by these committed and talented health center employees.

There are more than 1,400 community health centers around the country and nine in Rhode Island. In our state, one in five people rely on a community health center for care. The care they receive is a testament to the 2,300 employees working in health centers from Woonsocket to Westerly.

This year marks 40 years since I joined my first community health center as chief financial officer and 25 years as president and CEO of Providence Community Health Centers, the state's largest federally qualified health center.

It is a time of reflection and gratitude, as I am retiring at the end of this year.

When I joined Providence Community Health Centers in 2001, we had fewer than 100 employees caring for 18,000 patients at six sites around the capital city. Today, PCHC is home to 500 employees who care for more than 80,000 patients at eight health centers and other locations around Providence. This growth in sites and patients receiving care was made possible by an engaged board and hundreds of selfless employees.

The ability of health centers to care for people who struggle to access care provides a foundation for the rest of the health care system. We do so with a focus on delivering high quality, low-cost care, making health centers an irreplaceable component of the health care system.

Like every sector, community health centers have seen incredible changes over the last quarter-century. Technology has enabled us to deliver faster and better care while we stay focused on the human connection that is critical to patient care. We continue to struggle

with reimbursement, which in turn makes recruitment a challenge. Fortunately, there are thousands of people who want to work in a setting where they can truly make a difference.

The growth I have helped facilitate over my 25 years as CEO means so much to me and my team because it means more people who need help are getting it.

Before we opened our new adult dental clinic two years ago, that care was being delivered only by our team in a basement at Crossroads Rhode Island. A woman in her sixties who wasn't a patient of ours showed up in excruciating pain, crying because she could not find a dentist who would take her Medicaid insurance. Having nowhere else to go, she climbed on a bus to our clinic, praying we would help her.

After her visit, she tearfully told our staff, "You said yes when others said no, and you said yes with no hesitation. You made me feel like a human and not a number"

"Yes" is the motto of community health center employees. They say "yes" while doing the most important work imaginable – caring for others with respect in their time of need.

Thank you to the thousands of community health center employees who say "yes" every day. Happy National Health Center Week.

Merrill Thomas is President and CEO of Providence Community Health Centers.