



Lori Donley and Durward Humphrey

# Creating Access to Health Care

The **Katahdin Valley Health Center** is working to provide services to several of Maine's rural communities. Through collaboration—not competition—they are growing by leaps and bounds. BY SHELLEY FARRINGTON

**W**hen the Milliken Memorial Hospital in Island Falls closed in 1974, people were scared. Where would local citizens go for their health care needs? Millinocket is 40 miles south and Houlton is a 35-minute drive northeast. A group of citizens from Patten came forward and started a clinic they named Katahdin Valley Health Center (KVHC) in the back of Merrow's Department Store.

Thirty-eight years later, the Federally Qualified Health Center has expanded from its one site in Patten, with 11 employees, to include three more sites, in Island Falls, Houlton, and Millinocket, with 97 employees in all. The budget has grown, too—from \$500,000 to over \$8 million today, which helps provide

PHOTOS: MELANIE BROOKS

medical, dental, optometry, and behavioral health services to people from Mars Hill to Brownville.

"It's all about access," says CEO Durward Humphrey, who has been with KVHC since 2000. "How can we make services accessible to the people in our communities?"

That emphasis on access was never more important to people in the Katahdin region than it was in the early 2000s, as they rode the roller coaster of the local paper mill bankruptcy and eventual closure.

Both Humphrey and COO Lori Donley are proud of the way KVHC responded to the mill crisis. During those years, KVHC began offering a lifeline to families dealing with lost jobs and wages, with an income-based sliding fee scale and a prescription drug program that provides free and/or low-cost drugs to patients.

In 2004, KVHC received an expansion grant to open a clinic in Millinocket. They ended up building two—one for dental services and the other offering medical and behavioral services—which started servicing the community in 2005.

More recently, KVHC consolidated its offerings in Millinocket under one roof, with a new \$2.3-million facility, paid for by the Federal Affordable Care Act. Humphrey says that the consolidation provides patients and providers with a more efficient and collaborative environment for care.

Instead of shuttling between two (or more) buildings for their health care needs, KVHC patients now have the convenience of being seen at just one building. In addition, if a patient's dentist needs to consult his primary care physician before doing a procedure, all he or she has to do is walk across the hall. All health care practitioners can now easily get together and talk about current healthcare topics and trends, which fosters a more collaborative effort, Humphries says.

Another issue KVHC recently tackled was the need to provide more walk-in care to handle non-emergency needs in the Houlton area. In 2012, KVHC opened its first open-access clinic. Patients from all areas and incomes are seen on a first-come, first-served basis, and those requiring urgent care are referred to Houlton Regional Hospital. Donley said this service saves patients a costly trip to the ER and also helps the hospital to run more efficiently.



The Katahdin Valley Health Center in Patten.

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"Our lower-level visits are down so we have to assume that people are going to the clinic, and that's good because that's what they're there for," says Tom Moakler, CEO of Houlton Regional Hospital, which has seen about 450 fewer patients and treated fewer non-emergencies between August 2011 and August 2012. "We applaud their efforts."

Because KVHC's open-access clinic in Houlton has been so successful, similar clinics are being considered in Patten and Millinocket, as part of the organization's long-term plan.

Most of this much-needed expansion can be attributed to a successful grant-writing team, headed by Donley. With three other health care outlets serving patients in the Katahdin region—Millinocket Regional Hospital, Houlton Regional Hospital, and the Health Access Network—Donley makes sure the grants they apply for help them offer something these other providers don't.

"It doesn't make sense for KVHC to compete with other clinics or hospitals, because it doesn't help patients or in-

crease access," Donley says. She works to make sure that what KVHC implements will be sustainable beyond the grant, and that it isn't being offered by another health care agency.

Thanks to a federal grant, KVHC can count on at least \$1.9 million yearly for its budget, giving it an advantage over the local community hospitals. But for Donley and Humphrey, it's about collaboration—not competition. Donley is proud of the partnerships KVHC has with other agencies, which includes The Aroostook Medical Center, Community Health and Counseling Services, Mountain Heights Health Care, and the Visiting Nurses of Aroostook, to name a few.

And thanks to a telemedicine and distance-learning grant, all of these medical centers are linked together, creating a community of caring in Maine's most rural area. "I'm very proud of what we've been able to accomplish in terms of access," Donley says. "Our patients, our employees, and our community are our priorities, and we put all of our resources right back into our programs." □