

GNB Community Health Center dealing with \$500k deficit



CEO Cheryl Bartlett says Monday's layoffs to offset the deficit won't affect patient care. The state of the health center's budget has to do with federal funding, state policy changes and the transition to a MassHealth Accountable Care Organization.

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Health center deals with deficit, makes cuts

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NEW BEDFORD — Cutting 17 positions on Monday is one of the ways the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center is attempting to overcome a nearly \$500,000 deficit.

"It should not affect patient care at all. That was our focus," President and CEO Cheryl Bartlett said Wednesday about the layoffs, which hit the billing department, non-direct patient care workers and a grant-funded nursing position, all based at the downtown New Bedford health center.

The health center has spent the past 10 months trying to cut operational costs, and it came down to having to eliminate some positions,

Bartlett said.

The state of the health center's budget has to do with federal funding, state policy changes and the transition to a MassHealth Accountable Care Organization (ACO), which started March 1. ACOs are networks of physicians, hospitals and other community-based health care providers held accountable financially for cost, quality and member experience. The model also includes preventive care, checking in with patients more often, and reducing the number of hospital admissions.

Bartlett has said between 50 to 60 percent of the health center's patients are on Medicaid. Those patients have until July 1 to take action with their plan.

For MassHealth patients who

haven't visited the health center since before the ACO enrollment period began, Bartlett recommends checking in with the center.

Transitioning to this new payment model of receiving a set amount of money per patient per month has presented the health center with a "fiscal vulnerability."

The center is working on reaching out to people, but the number of patients to enroll in this system still remains a question, meaning uncertainties in the budget.

In the context of the layoffs, a professional business vendor will take care of the health center's billing.

A new severance policy was created and an outplacement company, along with the center's human

resources, is available to help those let go prepare their resumes and begin looking for a new job.

A similar plan was in place when the health center closed its laboratory in October 2017 as a result of a deficit of the same amount. At that point, 12 people lost their jobs.

The health center is also trying to fill a couple of vacancies for physicians, she said. It's hard to hire doctors that practice primary care because people tend to go into specialties to make more money; plus, community health centers aren't able to offer the same salaries as health systems, Bartlett said.

"I think it's even harder in the health care world to make budget cuts when our mission is about helping people," she said.