

OPINION

Questions? Contact Jim DeArruda, editorial page editor | 508-973-4332

The Standard-Times

SERVING THE SOUTHCOAST COMMUNITY

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OUR VIEW

State and NB community health center will innovate on care

Massachusetts continues to provide leadership in public health and health care delivery as Accountable Care Organizations prepare to step beyond pilot programs that move away from fee-based models among MassHealth's 1.9 million patients. The Greater New Bedford Community Health Center Inc. will take a leading role in the process.

The health center's new CEO, Cheryl Bartlett, is just the person to implement a program locally that has shown promise in its early stages after a December launch.

Ms. Bartlett, a registered nurse, began her new job on July 10, but her broad experience and love for "boots-on-the-ground" public health work make GNBCHC an ideal candidate to move the process forward and bring better outcomes for the 24,000 patients the center serves each year.

By holding community-based health and social service organizations accountable for their outcomes, the goal of the transition is to "improve behavioral health, long-term supports and health-related social needs for MassHealth members," according to the state Department of Health and Human Services. The five identified goals of the program include holding providers accountable for costs and quality alike; integrating physical and behavioral health, long-term services and supports, and health-related social services; preserving current levels of coverage; expanding access to recovery and disorder services to address the opioid addiction crisis; and supporting providers of social safety nets to sustain care for Medicaid and low-income individuals. The need for the program's success on SouthCoast is undeniable.

Ms. Bartlett's career before arriving at the local health center seems to have been scripted for the task, as well as for the overall mission of the center: "[P]roviding high quality, integrated care for all patients regardless of their ability to pay."

She has worked by "knocking on doors" for decades on Nantucket, addressing

toward AIDS patients, while establishing treatment and educational programs, and spent another four years using the same methods to help protect homes being lost to the eroding coast, educating the islanders to the concerns and contributions of the wealthy, upon whom the working class rely for significant support and better health.

Off-island, she worked to establish a new, nursing-based approach to homelessness on the Cape, going beyond the warehousing of the homeless to successfully address that population's mental health and substance abuse issues, resulting in long-term recovery, appropriate behavioral care, and a return to productive participation in society for many.

As Gov. Deval Patrick's commissioner of public health, she guided the department through the twin scandals involving the New England Compounding Pharmacy and the state Drug Lab. She was instrumental in helping then-Gov. Patrick declare the opioid crisis an emergency in 2014, the first state to do so, which allowed an immediate approach to and support of prevention, treatment and long-term recovery policies. Providing Narcan to public safety departments around the state was piloted in New Bedford.

She saw the issues of public health and worked closely with Community Health Centers as the commissioner, but her desire to improve the social issues that affect public health so significantly — safety, and access to healthy food and economic opportunity — and to do it from the front lines brought her back to SouthCoast. (Her parents graduated from Fairhaven High School and she summured here in her youth.)

She has worked in research, served on the Nantucket Board of Selectmen, and learned the tangle of environmental regulations. She was quick to sign onto a health services program taking place this Saturday at the Waypoint Event Center on MacArthur Drive in New Bedford.

We look forward to seeing the transformation of the Bay State's leadership on health care, and also to watching Ms. Bartlett's leadership of GNBCHC, already on display

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