

## Health Center

As health costs rise and the nation wrestles with reforming the system, more people in the region are depending on community clinics for a range of affordable care.

To handle the spike in demand, two Bridgeport-based community health agencies – Optimus Health Care and Southwest Community Health Center – have applied for federal funding to expand facilities through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. They are competing with 600 national health care centers for the funding available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Southwest has already received \$800,000 in stimulus funds toward the construction of an estimated \$2.5 million one-story dental center on Albion Street property owned by the Bridgeport Housing Authority. The agency has applied for \$5.4 million to construct an adjoining medical center on the property.

As part of the project, the BHA would construct four floors of low-income housing units above Southwest's planned dental center. The new facilities would replace Southwest's clinic site at 361 Bird St., also owned by the BHA. "If we don't have the funding for phase 2, we would have nowhere to deliver medical services," said Kathy Yacavone, president and chief executive officer of Southwest.

The agency must vacate the Bird Street building next year because the BHA does not have the funds to make the structure handicapped-accessible. Nicholas Calace, the BHA executive director, said the upgrades could cost up to \$1 million but the building is only worth about \$300,000. The 35 two-bedroom low-income units would also count as Father Panik replacement units. The BHA already has \$5 million for the estimated \$12 million housing phase.

Calace said Southwest serves many of the BHA's clients, including residents of the P.T. Barnum Apartments. "The services they provide, specifically for the residents of P.T. Barnum, are something we wouldn't be able to duplicate if they are not there," he said.

Former Superior Court Judge Carmen Lopez, a Black Rock resident, thinks development on the empty lot would dramatically improve the area. "I believe that it will enhance the community, as well as help meet the moral obligation of providing housing and health care for our low-income neighbors and friends," she said.