

Construction starts on wellness campus in OKC

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Published: October 24th, 2011



Dr. Lynn Mitchell at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Northeast Regional Health and Wellness Campus on Monday. (Photo by Maike Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Public health and primary care are one step closer to a new type of collaboration that leaders in both areas say is critical to solving some of Oklahoma’s health woes.

Ground was broken Monday on the Northeast Regional Health and Wellness Campus, a new type of facility that combines physician services with prevention, wellness and screening. It will be built on 54 acres north of Remington Park just off NE 63rd Street. It is intentionally situated in the 73111 ZIP code, which has some of the worst health outcomes in Oklahoma County.

“The chance to practice and see your patients in a setting that offers the capabilities of this campus is one that

health care providers think of as a dream come true,” said Dr. Lynn Mitchell, chief medical officer of OU Medicine. “As a prevention medicine doc myself, I believe this is an ideal opportunity to permanently join public health, wellness, prevention and primary care into a setting for our patients to meet their total health care needs and see that every aspect of their health is addressed, not just their illnesses.”

Providers from OU will be on-site at a clinic that is planned for the center. Other spaces will be dedicated to prevention and health promotion services and screenings. A conference center is planned to accommodate larger groups. Outdoors, walking trails and sports fields will be built so that the concept of healthy lifestyles can be put into practice.

The project is coordinated through the Oklahoma City-County Health Department and its Wellness Now program.

The 73111 ZIP code faces an uphill battle against poverty and health problems. According to the health department’s research and census numbers, 30 percent of residents in 73111 live below the poverty level; that number jumps to 62 percent for single mothers. They’re nearly three times as likely to suffer a chronic disease like diabetes as their neighbors a little farther northeast.

Health comparisons to other county ZIP codes are striking. For example, mortality from cardiovascular disease is 42.96 per 100,000 people in the 73151 ZIP code (the county’s wealthiest). In 73111, cardiovascular disease mortality is 436.88 per 100,000 – 10 times higher.

“We understand we’ve had inaction until now,” Gary Cox, director of the Oklahoma City-County Health Department, said in a previous interview with The Journal Record. “We’ve had bits and pieces of action to try to improve things, but we’ve not had something that’s been coordinated and focused. We’ve realized that our collective actions or inactions are going to impact our future.”

Cox said the campus, scheduled to be completed in fall 2012, stands to become a national model for its blending of medical care and a wellness focus – giving people the tools they need to make healthy decisions.

Mick Cornett, mayor of Oklahoma City, said the 55 community partners that will help with the

Northeast Regional Health and Wellness Campus are critical to its success. Improving a community's health issues can't be accomplished by a small group, he said.

Cornett said he believes Oklahoma City has momentum toward improving its poor health outcomes.

"What I think is encouraging about this community especially is that we don't hide when we have an issue; we address it," he said. "Health problems are not specific to Oklahoma City. Every community out there is trying to find the same solutions we're trying to find. But we're proactively taking steps to address them."

The Oklahoma City-County Health Department bought the acreage for \$1 million earlier this year. The land has its own story going back to before statehood. Dave Cox, deputy director at the health department, said Dr. Zeno Beemblossom bought 160 acres for \$150 just after the Land Run. His descendants, several of whom attended the groundbreaking ceremony, were excited about the new use of the land, Cox said.

Others are looking at ways they can boost the lives of people in 73111. State Rep. Mike Shelton, D-Oklahoma City, whose district includes that ZIP code, recently returned with ideas from a health conference sponsored by the National Black Caucus of State Legislators. African-Americans suffer from a disproportionate percentage of chronic diseases when compared to the rest of the population, Shelton said. The 73111 ZIP code is predominantly black – 89.4 percent of a 12,658 population.

Shelton said he'd like to replicate a program he learned about from the Purdue University: food trucks filled with locally grown fruits and vegetables visiting areas where people have little access to nutritious food. Such "food deserts" are not uncommon in Oklahoma, Shelton said, and he'd like to start the process of changing them in his home district.

Shelton said he envisions the produce to be reasonably priced and taken directly to people who otherwise would not get it.

"It's not just helping people get healthier; it has a bigger effect," he said. "It's helping farmers sell their produce. I think it's a win-win."

Shelton said he is working with Langston University to obtain a truck for the program, then he plans to reach out to local farmers. He also expects to work on legislation that would develop a pilot program for the food trucks.

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