

With need growing, Worcester's free medical program opens larger space



U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, speaks at the dedication of the Hart-Wood Free Medical Program's new location May 4. RICK CINCLAIR/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

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WORCESTER – Moments before a ceremony to dedicate a new location for the city's oldest free medical program, Dr. Tracy Kedian gave her take on the state of the nation's health care system.

"Health care in the United States is pretty broken," said Kedian, who practices family medicine at UMass Memorial Health. "There just aren't enough doctors."

Kedian volunteers at the [Hart-Wood Free Medical Program](#) and joined others May 4 at the First Unitarian Church on Main Street to dedicate the church as the program's new home.



Chief Operation Officer David Runyan speaks at the dedication of the Hart-Wood Free Medical Program's new location May 4. RICK CINCLAIR/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

For the past 35 years, it operated out of the Epworth United Methodist Church on Salisbury Street, under the name Worcester Evening Free Medical Service Program. However, the number of people needing free care swelled to the point that Epworth didn't have enough space to meet the demand. Problem solved, because First Unitarian has more space to fill the need.

Several speakers during the dedication noted that Hart-Wood has come a long way from when it was founded 35 years ago by the late Rev. Barry Wood and Dr. Paul Hart. Now it's one of seven programs in the Worcester Free Care Collaborative, with more than 300 volunteers. It served over 7,500 patients last year.

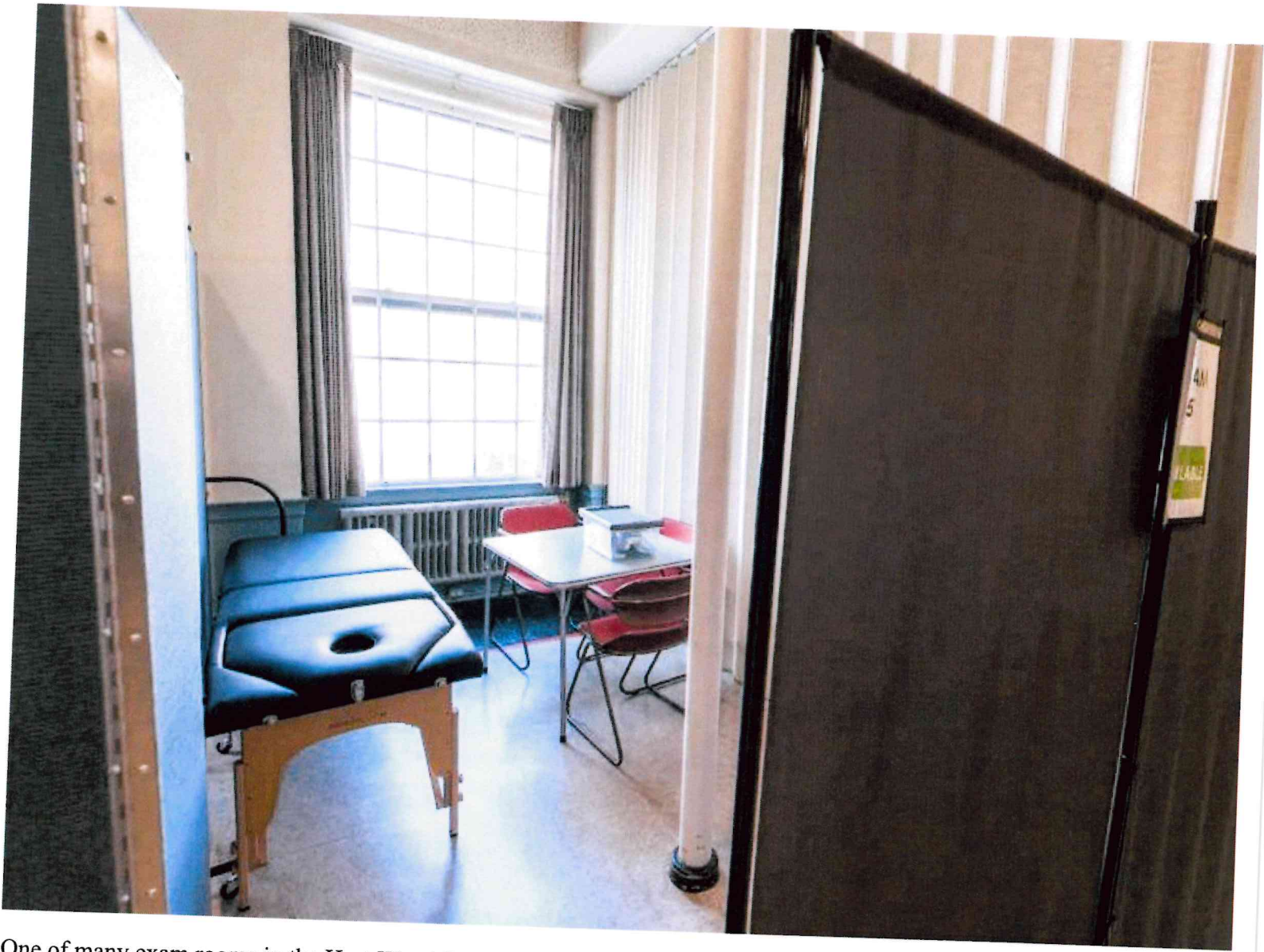
Like Kedian, several speakers praised the program's work but also noted that the demand for free care is swelling due to political and economic forces. While the Hart-Wood is an example of the positive work being done to meet the needs of the uninsured and underinsured, they said it's not enough to serve everyone who is struggling to access health care.

Approximately 140,000 Massachusetts residents don't have health insurance, according to [a 2025 survey](#) from the Center for Health Information and Analysis.

As Kedian sees it, the rising cost of health care is a barrier to accessing care, even for those with insurance. She believes there aren't enough doctors to give preventive care and attributed that challenge to a number of factors including retirements during the COVID-19 pandemic due to burnout and fewer medical students going into primary care. Some industry observers say that's because of long hours and low pay.

"It's really bad now," said Kedian. "Emergency rooms are backed up [with patients]. People are a lot sicker now than they were before the pandemic."

Amie Shei, president and chief executive officer at the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, said if not for Hart-Wood, many residents wouldn't get the care they need.



One of many exam rooms in the Hart-Wood Free Medical Program's new location at the First Unitarian Church May 4. RICK CINCLAIR/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

However, patients need coordinated care, said Shei, and that's where free programs like Hart-Wood fall short. "It's fragmented care. The burden is on patients to coordinate their care. It's a Band-Aid."

Congressional Republicans' actions have contributed to the growing numbers of patients with little or no insurance, said U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern at the dedication.

The Worcester Democrat noted that the One Big Beautiful Bill Act cut roughly \$1 trillion from Medicaid and nearly \$200 billion in federal food assistance. It's estimated 10 million to 15 million Americans will lose their health insurance because of the bill including more than 300,000 in Massachusetts.

"We're in for a rough ride," said McGovern, ending his comments with praise for Hart-Wood volunteers: "People in the community are better off because of you. You are changing the world."

Hart-Wood's new home has roughly 6,000 square feet of space, more than 50% larger than what it had at Epworth. There are 10 exam rooms including six for general medical visits and four for specialty care, blood draws and pediatric vaccinations.

The clinic is open every Monday from 6 to 8 p.m.

Deborah Aditays knows it well, having volunteered since the program started. Rev. Wood asked her to join the effort 35 years ago and Aditays, a retired registered nurse, wasn't about to say no.

“It’s a wonderful program,” she said.

Dr. David Runyan, president of the Worcester Free Care Collaborative, believes there’s a need for more programs like Hart-Wood because they’re cost-effective. Each patient visit runs \$18 on average at all the sites in the collaborative, said Runyan, who is a nurse practitioner at UMass Memorial Health.

Hart-Wood patients tell Runyan they would go to the emergency room if the program didn't exist. Emergency room care is considerably more expensive and experts say it drives up health care costs for everyone.

Grants and private donations fund the collaborative’s budget, which barely tops \$100,000 annually, according to Runyan. Some services including imaging are outsourced to UMass Memorial Health. If a patient is uninsured, the health system bills Hart-Wood.

The collaborative receives no state or federal money, has no paid staff and doesn't pay rent for its locations.

Volunteers are clinical and nonclinical, and those giving medical care are mostly medical and nursing students from UMass Chan Medical School. Assumption University students studying to become physician assistants are also in the mix.

Care at the clinics is overseen on-site by licensed doctors and other medical professionals.

Runyan has been meeting with state and local officials to plan for how to tackle what is expected to be an onslaught of patients needing free care due to federal Medicaid cuts.

“It frightening,” said Runyan. “We know there are going to be impacts. We’re just not sure how much.”

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This article originally appeared on Telegram & Gazette: [Worcester's oldest free medical program opens new, larger space](#)