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Valley Health unveils mobile mammography unit

By MICKEY POWELL The Winchester Star

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A ribbon cutting was held at the Valley Health Diagnostic Center on the campus of Winchester Medical Center on Monday to launch a new mobile mammography van to expand access to lifesaving breast imaging services for wor

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Valley Health is making it easier for women to obtain screenings for breast cancer.

Monday afternoon, the regional health system unveiled its new Steven E. & Beverley B. Shoemaker Mobile Mammography Unit outside Winchester Medical Center's Diagnostic Center.

The mobile unit will travel throughout Valley Health's service territory to provide mammograms to women at major employers, churches, stores, community centers and other locations.

Roughly 1 in 8 women in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer at some point in their lives, and 1 in 33 will die of the disease, statistics from the American Cancer Society show.

A mammogram is an X-ray image of the breast using low-dose radiation. It's used to detect early signs of breast cancer, including hard, painless lumps or masses in the breast or underarm region, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Cancer Institute.

Early cancer detection saves lives. The CDC recommends that women ages 40-74 who are at average risk for breast cancer get a mammogram at least every two years. Annually is better.

The mobile unit is recognizable by its blue-and-white exterior, featuring a pink stripe and sketches of pink flowers. The interior is blue, gray and white, a color motif intended to relax patients.

Inside the 36-foot-long mobile mammography unit is a Hologic 3D (three-dimensional) mammography machine, the same technology used at Valley Health-operated hospitals and medical clinics in the Northern Shenandoah Valley and West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle.

Mammograms are usually covered by insurance, said Jon Lough, Valley Health's senior director for medical imaging.

Yet studies show that less than 50% of area women eligible for annual screening mammograms get them.

"We know that for many women, the challenge isn't the cost of a screening. It's finding the time, transportation or flexibility (in personal schedules) to get to an appointment," said Jenny Grooms, executive director of Valley Health Foundations.

"My hope," Grooms said, "is that by bringing care directly into our communities, we can make it easier for women to prioritize their health and encourage one another to take those few important minutes for an annual screening."

Plans are for the mobile unit to travel several days a week beginning this fall. Valley Health is currently finalizing its schedule and partnerships with community organizations and employers interested in hosting it.

Approximately 2-3 women can be screened per hour inside the unit, which contains a small waiting area and dressing room.

Two Valley Health employees will staff the van. One will be an imaging technician. The other will be either a technician or an assistant who will register patients, Lough said.

A patient will have show proof that she hasn't had a mammogram within the past 366 days, he said. But that's the only significant requirement to receive one.

The mobile unit represents the culmination of one aspect of the Valley Health Foundations' three-year "Stronger Together" campaign to raise \$20 million to address critical local health needs.

Beverley Shoemaker and her late husband were the major contributors to the mobile unit project, according to Valley Health officials.

Shoemaker, of Stephens City, said the unit will make obtaining a crucial medical procedure "just so convenient" for women.

"It's a service that's needed so much in this area," she said.

Community donations also went toward purchasing the unit, the cost of which wasn't disclosed.

"To me, this mobile mammography unit is a true gift from the community, for the community," Grooms said.

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