



HCREA Expertly Captains Construction of Federal Grant-Funded Federally Qualified Health Center in Camden, NJ

Works with Multiple Community, State, and Federal Entities and Keeps Health Care Facility Open to Patients During Entire Construction Project

THE CHALLENGE

Project H.O.P.E., Inc. provides culturally sensitive, comprehensive primary health care to the homeless population in Camden County, NJ. One of five Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) homeless projects in New Jersey, Project H.O.P.E. stands for Homeless Outreach Program Enrichment, and is the only provider of medical services specifically for the homeless in Camden County.

In 2012, Project H.O.P.E. received a \$4.7 million grant from the Affordable Health Care Act to build a new health care center with more exam rooms and the ability to house administrative and clinical staff in one space. A construction project funded by a federal grant comes with limited time and limited dollars. There are stringent state guidelines, and the project has to be exactly as the federal government and the state expect it to be, making it very difficult to change the plans during the course of the project.

When they received the grant, Project H.O.P.E. was leasing a 2,300 square foot building from the city of Camden on a 10,000 square foot lot on West Street. "We needed a firm who not only specialized in health care real estate but had specifically worked with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) before," says Patricia DeShields, MSW, LSW, RN, CEO of Project H.O.P.E. "We wanted professionals who had walked through this, understood the players, knew which i's had to be dotted and which t's crossed. We could not hire partners that were novices at working with the state and with federal grant money."

THE SOLUTION

DeShields had learned about HCREA at an event sponsored by the New Jersey Primary Care Association, which represents community health centers and community-based ambulatory healthcare facilities throughout the state. "HCREA demonstrated that they had success solving the unique problems of other FQHC construction projects," DeShields says. Project H.O.P.E. hired HCREA in 2013 as owner's representatives to help them create a new, larger facility.

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*Patricia DeShields,
MSW, LSW, RN
CEO of Project H.O.P.E.*

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HCREA was tasked with evaluating Project H.O.P.E.’s needs, hiring an architect, finding a General Contractor, managing relationships with the city, keeping the board informed, and, most importantly, keeping the health care center fully operational treating patients throughout the project. HCREA renegotiated parts of Project H.O.P.E.’s lease with the city of Camden, gained the right to knock down the existing building, and led their client through the design process of a 12,000 square foot building that would enable them to greatly expand their services.

“HCREA interviewed our staff and took the time to gain an understanding of the patient population that we serve,” says DeShields. They asked the social work staff, doctors, and nurses what they did day-to-day and how their services could be complemented by a new design. DeShields says the staff felt like HCREA was genuinely invested in creating a space that was designed to meet both their needs and the needs of this unique patient population.

Project H.O.P.E. wanted to maximize the size of the building but zoning required maintaining a certain number of parking spots. HCREA negotiated with the city for extra lot coverage and were able to cover 97 percent of the hard surface, which is far beyond what’s normally allowed. HCREA was able to get this variance based on the value of the facility to the community. They were able to reduce the number of parking spaces by proving the facility had a largely pedestrian and public transit population. HCREA also negotiated changes in design to keep costs down while maximizing use of natural light and durable materials.

“HCREA was very attentive to the fact that we wanted the space to be visually appealing to our patients,” DeShields adds. “They come from difficult places. They come with burdens that patients coming into other doctor’s offices don’t carry. We wanted it to be welcoming, to be a place where patients could feel safe, comfortable, and respected.”

From the beginning, Project H.O.P.E. planned to add behavioral services to the new facility. But this was complicated, as state licensing requirements require some separation of behavioral and primary medical facilities. “In our opinion, best practice is to provide integrative care which delivers behavioral services with primary services,” DeShields says. “How could we make it an integrated space that still met the state requirements? HCREA proposed two separate wings that would enable easy handoff from one provider to another.”

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HCREA recommended constructing the new building in an L-shape around the old building, and then tearing the old building down. Along the way they had to get variances and waivers from the zoning and planning boards and had to contend with challenging weather. The discovery of the foundation of an old school beneath the property brought financial and timeline challenges. HCREA helped Project H.O.P.E. to communicate with community and handled paperwork with federal government to get their funds released and to get an extension of time when these unforeseeable delays were going to result in missing their deadline.

This was a complex project involving multiple entities and regulations at the city, state and federal level. Communication was required between all these entities and HCREA handled all the monthly and quarterly reporting. Every time they made a tiny change HCREA had to go back to all the entities and get approval. "HCREA's combination of the architectural and legal real estate expertise is so unique," says DeShields. "With that expertise in both worlds, they can cross the barriers and have a conversation that both sides will understand. They know how to meet with somebody and explore options for resolution."

THE RESULTS

"Creating a new structure around an existing structure while still providing health care was a big challenge, especially when it came to safety," DeShields says. "In the end, we only closed a half day to move into the new facility. HCREA allowed us to be operational the entire time we were under construction."

In the summer of 2015, Project H.O.P.E. opened its new West Street Health Center – a 12,000 square foot facility. They went from three exam rooms to 12 and brought in additional medical practitioners, licensed clinical social workers, care managers and nurses. They are now hosting nutrition classes and diabetes education groups in a new community room. The new facility has enabled Project H.O.P.E. to provide services they were previously unable to provide due to limitations of space and facility. They have added over 1,000 new unduplicated patients, which amounts to approximately 10,000 additional visits. "Patients feel like they are coming into an environment where they are going to be treated well," says DeShields. Project H.O.P.E. needed experts in real estate, architecture, New Jersey law, federal grants, health care facilities, and the specific guidelines governing FQHCs. They found it all in HCREA.

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