

Clinics collaborating on countywide care

By CHRIS ERICKSON

Collaborations between Sakakawa Medical Center and Coal Country Community Health Center are going well, and a new grant for CCCHC will offer a potential new service for the area.

Darold Bertsch, CEO of SMC and Interim CEO of CCCHC, said what had been somewhat of a friendly rivalry between the two organizations has turned into a team effort to serve the county.

"Each individual organization was running nicely before, but now that we're working together I think we can make sure to do things collaboratively for the benefit of the residents of Mercer County," Bertsch said. "Over the years there's been a competitive spirit in place and now it's more a collaborative spirit to address the healthcare needs of residents of Mercer County and the surrounding areas."

He said that due to unknowns in healthcare reform or budget deficit and potential cuts resulting from that, the two organizations were working to ensure that they could meet whatever needs came up in the future.

"As we're working together,

if there are cuts in healthcare we will be better able to meet those challenges," he added. "We're in a better position when we work together to meet healthcare needs." Since the collaboration has gone into place earlier this

"I'm anxious and excited to see what the future holds as we continue to develop this relationship."

-Darold Bertsch, CEO of Sakakawa Medical Center, Interim CEO of Coal Country Community Health Center

year, Bertsch has provided administrative support for CCCHC while still serving as the CEO of SMC. He said the process has gone well due to the professionalism of the providers and staffs.

"Our providers, our physicians work together so well already. There was already some collaboration in place," he said. "There hasn't been a lot of exchanging staffs yet. This is a work in progress. As we continue to work toward the goal of strengthening this collaboration we have to work with governmental entities to ensure that the structure we want to put together here is something that will be approved."

"Each organization has regulatory requirements they need to follow," he continued. "Community health centers

have certain requirements as far as administration and leadership goes. We're making sure we satisfy those needs, but most importantly, take care of the needs of what we have going on here.

"We've got such good providers and staff at both organizations, that my role now is just to not get in the way but help support them."

Bertsch added. "They know what to do; they're professionals and provide great care. The best thing I can do is to provide them with the support they need."

In addition to the collaborations, a new grant could allow for more services for the community.

Last fall, CCCHC submitted a Network Development grant proposal to expand on its behavioral healthcare needs.

The organization recently announced that it – along with 20 other recipients around the nation – have received the grant from the federal Office of Rural Health Policy.

The purpose of the Network Development grant program is to expand access, coordinate

and improve the quality of essential health care services, and enhance the delivery of health care in rural areas. Network Development grants provide funding for three years.

"The goal of the grant is extremely important. All across the state of North Dakota, and even throughout the country, there are inadequate behavioral health services available," Bertsch said. "This grant will help foster collaboration among the partners listed to reduce some of the barriers in accessing mental health services. This partnership will help us address that in the areas – not just at CCCHC, but also the Three Affiliated Tribes."

The grant will help kickstart the program. First the organizations will figure out the strategic needs, and later will work to implement a program.

According to CCCHC, the organization will use their Network Development grant to create a successful network of behavioral health entities that will work to improve access to behavioral health care and reduce behavioral health disparities in rural and tribal communities. Coal Country Community Health Center will act as the fiscal agent, partnering with Mental Health America of North Dakota; the North Dakota Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health; The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Behavioral Health

Department; and the North Dakota Area Health Education Center to increase access to behavioral health care and eliminate behavioral health disparities to rural and tribal communities.

"Coal Country Community Health Center is anxious to work collaboratively with our partner organizations to develop strategies to help improve access to behavioral health services and reduce existing barriers," Bertsch said.

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration website, these grants support rural providers who work in formal networks, alliances, coalitions or partnerships to integrate administrative, clinical, technological, and financial functions. The ultimate goal of this grant is to strengthen the rural health care delivery system by improving the viability of the individual providers in the network, and/or improving the delivery of care to people served by the network.

Bertsch said he was happy to see where everything was in the Mercer County healthcare community.

"I'm anxious and excited to see what the future holds as we continue to develop this relationship," he said. "I think as the relationship is developed we can do a better job of providing services here and concentrate our efforts on retaining everyone we have."