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## **Free and charitable clinic Vecinos spearheads one-stop services hub for uninsured and low-income residents of western North Carolina**

- *\$5.6 million Community Health Hub will put health care, other services under one roof*
- *Effort inspired by unmet needs especially noted by community outreach during pandemic*
- *Franklin facility will improve access to services and expand providers' capacity to serve*

**FRANKLIN, N.C. (June 29, 2022)** – Vecinos, a free and charitable clinic providing bilingual primary and behavioral health care in western North Carolina, is leading a \$5.6 million effort to better serve the region's uninsured and low-income residents by bringing multiple health and social services under one roof.

On Friday, the clinic finalized the purchase of a 15,000-square-foot building near downtown Franklin that will become the Community Health Hub, home to medical, dental, and behavioral health care, domestic violence counseling, legal services, and community advocacy – all offered on a bilingual basis.

“The uninsured and low-income population in western North Carolina, in particular the Spanish-speaking population, faces significant barriers to accessing health care,” said Marianne Martinez, Vecinos’ executive director. “The Community Health Hub will allow our neighbors to conveniently receive coordinated and streamlined, high-quality services for free in their language.”

Vecinos’ focus since its founding in 2004 has been on serving farmworkers, but the clinic increased its community outreach in 2020 in response to COVID-related health care needs. The experience led Vecinos to change its charter to expand its mission and inspired the Community Health Hub concept.

In addition to Vecinos, named for the Spanish word for “neighbors,” coalition partners utilizing the Community Health Hub will include:

- Blue Ridge Free Dental Clinic, which will continue providing dental care at its clinic in Cashiers and add four dental operatories at the Franklin location
- 30<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Domestic Violence-Sexual Assault Alliance in Waynesville
- El Centro Comunitario of Macon County, a Hispanic community advocacy group
- Asheville-based Pisgah Legal Services, which provides legal services to low-income people

Dogwood Health Trust in Asheville provided a temporary bridge loan to finance the cost of the building purchase. The coalition is launching a \$5.6 million capital campaign to repay the loan and fund required renovations to the facility. The projected opening date for the Community Health Hub is early 2024.

Vecinos and Blue Ridge Free Dental Clinic are members of the North Carolina Association of Free and Charitable Clinics (NCAFCC), a network of 72 clinics offering high-quality primary, specialty and behavioral health care, pharmacy, and other services to uninsured and underserved residents at little or no cost to patients.

[“Free and charitable clinics](#) play a vital role in North Carolina’s health care safety net and are on the forefront of innovations like the Community Health Hub,” said CEO Randy Jordan. “This initiative shows how clinics are collaborating with each other and other partners to expand access to health care and other services for the underserved and historically marginalized members of our communities.”

Vecinos will keep its current clinic and office location on the campus of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, where it saw 732 patients in 2021, and will be able to serve an additional 2,000 patients a year once the Community Health Hub is fully operational.

#### **About North Carolina Association of Free and Charitable Clinics**

The North Carolina Association of Free and Charitable Clinics supports 72 member clinics in expanding access to health care, reducing health disparities and improving the health of uninsured and underinsured individuals. Member clinics are a vital part of North Carolina’s safety net, providing care for 80,000 patients in 85 of the state’s 100 counties, including primary and specialty medical care; dental care; pharmacy services; optometry; behavioral health care; lab tests and hospital referrals. The association supports member clinics with education, advocacy, research, funding and collaboration, and promotes quality health care for all North Carolinians. Learn more at [www.ncafcc.org](http://www.ncafcc.org).

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**Media:** David Coburn at Coburn Communications, [david@coburncomm.com](mailto:david@coburncomm.com), 704.408.4276