

EDITORIAL: Program brings gender-affirming health services to LGBTQ+ community



Nicole Heady poses in front of the progress pride flag at the Wheeler Family Health & Wellness Center at 91 Northwest Dr. in Plainville, Friday, October 14, 2022. Heady is the peer support specialist for Walk With Me at Wheeler. The center offers a full continuum of affirming, integrated primary and behavioral health care services for LGBTQ+ clients, patients, students, and staff.
Dave Zajac, Record-Journal

November 01, 2022 08:10PM

<https://www.myrecordjournal.com/Opinion/Editorials/Walk-With-Me-brings-gender-affirming-health-services-to-LGBTQ-community.html>

In 2021, Wheeler Clinic began a new program to support the full spectrum of health-related needs in the LGBTQ+ community. The Walk With Me initiative was launched after the clinic received an anonymous \$100,000 donation specifically aimed at funding those services.

Now Wheeler has received a \$5,000 grant from the Main Street Community Foundation to expand its outpatient clinic for all LGBTQ+ residents of Connecticut.

Wheeler provides primary care, addiction services, and mental health treatment for all age groups with services available at numerous locations throughout the state, including Meriden, Southington and Plainville.

Walk With Me has quickly evolved as it has established care and support for LGBTQ+ individuals as well as their families. The program began at Wheeler's Plainville location and served only youth clients. However, the Walk with Me team quickly realized the need to make services available to all LGBTQ+ people in Connecticut, according to Sabrina Trocchi, president and CEO of Wheeler Clinic, speaking with Record-Journal reporter Cris Villalonga-Vivoni.

The goal is to provide patients, their parents and caregivers with "guidance and strategies to help navigate their child and their family's journey," Trocchi said.

In an interview with Villalonga-Vivoni, Nicole Heady, peer-support specialist at the Plainville location, notes that a vital aspect of Walk with Me is the inclusion of the patient's designated support systems. Family, caregivers and others the patient feels comfortable with can provide the support they need, beyond what therapy offers, for their larger life experience.

Villalonga-Vivoni quotes a 2020 state [survey that found 64% of LGBTQ+ respondents had concerns about accessing health care. Similarly, 55% of respondents were concerned about accessing mental health, addiction and substance abuse help. Those concerns centered around finding LGBTQ+ friendly and knowledgeable care, as well as the cost.](#)

The goal of Walk with Me is to eliminate those barriers with programs and services specifically designed for the LGBTQ+ community. The clinics will not turn anyone away due to inability to pay, according to Wheeler's website.

Gender-affirming primary care is available at Wheeler centers in Bristol, Hartford, New Britain, Plainville and Waterbury. Behavioral and peer-support services are only available at the Plainville and Hartford locations.

The imagery, and inherent comfort, in the name Walk With Me, along with Trocchi's description of a journey, carries an important message. LGBTQ+ individuals need company and support along the way as they navigate the complexities of finding good gender-affirming care.

The original generous donation Wheeler received has been put to good use. That funding was a remarkable gift to the state and creates a resource that deserves praise and recognition. With the Main Street Foundation kicking in another pot of money, Walk With Me shows it has already established a valued place in our communities.