

Tempe health center brings clinic, services, exercise together

By Wayne Schutsky, Tribune Staff Writer



Mountain Park Health Center's new Tempe location exemplifies the organization's community-based approach to wellness by providing public spaces for outdoor activities and gatherings in addition to traditional health-care facilities.

The new 32,000-square-foot clinic – located on the site of an old boat yard at Broadway Road and McClintock Drive – includes an additional 10,000 square feet pegged for future expansion.

That extra land currently houses the company's "tree forest," which consists of trees growing in box planters that will be placed in clinics when they mature.

"This clinic is three times the size of the other clinic that we had in Tempe, so naturally our goals are to get it to be three times the volume of patients," CEO John Swagert said. "We have only been open three months and we've already doubled, so it's not going to be long before we reach our goal."

The new Tempe clinic is the third adaptive-reuse project that Mountain Park has undertaken in the Valley, following projects in Maryvale and Phoenix.

Adaptive-reuse projects are becoming more popular, though they are seen less frequently in health care due to the needs of medical facilities. However, it "works here because this a clinical use not a hospital use," SmithGroupJJR designer Lyle Steely said.

SmithGroupJJR was the architect on the project.

The decision to reuse old structures ties into the company's overall mission.

"We like to take something that's not very attractive and make it into a community asset. We also very much like the recycling nature of it," Swagert said.

He added, "Rather than tearing down a building and having to dispose of all that waste or building something from the ground up, why not take something that already exists and make it into something useful and something surprising?"

While in many ways the clinic is a standard medical facility, the grounds surrounding it are unique in that they feature several amenities designed to encourage community health. These include a 0.6-mile walking path, jungle gym modeled after a DNA strand, green spaces for play and various landscaping installations designed for community use.

Those outdoor facilities are open to the public 24/7.

The clinic also includes meeting rooms similar to those at a public library that local residents and organizations can reserve for community gatherings.

Those features are not standard across all Mountain Park Health Center clinics as the company takes in comments from community stakeholders when deciding on which amenities to include in new facilities.

"The interesting thing about Mountain Park is they have a design process (in which they) engage the surrounding community and get a lot of feedback and buy-in from organizations and residents in the area," SmithGroupJJR designer Scott Steffes said.

He added that the inclusion of the walking track and play areas was largely a result of community feedback.

Mountain Park worked with the city of Tempe, the Tempe Police Department, Arizona State University, existing patients and neighborhood associations while building the clinic.

"We asked, 'What does the community want this to be?' Because the more ownership the community takes over the clinic, the more likely it is to succeed," Swagert said. "We want our clinics to feel like part of the community."

Swagert said the community was specifically looking for exercise space and a "multigenerational playground" that appealed to both children and adults.

The clinic provides a range of traditional medical services to patients, including primary care, dental, pediatrics and women's care.

The facility also provides WIC services.

Beyond that, Mountain Park also practices the integrated care model and has behavioral health specialists, psychologists and dietitians on site.

"We found that a lot of times patients are struggling with issues like stress or mild depression that are interfering with them being as healthy as they could be, but if we refer them out to

behavioral health services they often wouldn't go because there is a lot of stigma associated with it," Swagert said.

Mountain Park Health Clinic found that by bringing those services in-house, it can increase the chances that patients seek help for these issues by making it more convenient and leveraging the trust patients have in their existing primary care provider, Swagert said.

The clinic serves a primarily low-income population and accepts AHCCCS, Medicare and private insurance. It also has a sliding fee scale for eligible patients who do not have insurance.

In addition to its primary services, Mountain Park Health is involved in the community in other ways, including providing books, backpacks and food packages to local students.

The health-care company also administered a summer food program that served 9,000 meals to children in the community.

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