



Behavioral Health services

Greater Valley Health Center, A Hidden Gem in the Flathead

Photos by **TREVON BAKER PHOTOGRAPHY**

Q&A with Mary Sterhan, CEO



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Who is Greater Valley Health Center?

Greater Valley Health Center is a non-profit health care provider called a Federally Qualified Health Center, or FQHC. FQHCs were established by the Federal Government to provide affordable and comprehensive primary care services to the most vulnerable of an area's citizens. Today, Greater Valley, like many FQHCs, see a wide range of patients from all walks of life and for a wide range of services. Our mission is to provide exceptional patient-centered care regardless of ability to pay. We don't turn anyone away.

What services do you provide to the community?

Our clinics offer an integrated process using care teams to provide primary medical care, dental care, mental health services and care management for all ages. Using a team approach, we focus on caring for the whole person... their physical, mental and social needs either directly or through partnerships with specialists and community resources.

The Medical Clinic offers primary care services such as annual wellness visits, preventative screenings, treatment of common illnesses and minor injuries, prenatal care, obstetrics, and management of chronic diseases. Our providers include physicians, advanced practice clinicians and residents through the Family Medicine Residency of Western Montana who have rotations through Greater Valley to serve patients and communities in rural areas.

Our Behavioral Health team in conjunction with Intermountain offers individual, family and group counseling for all ages. The team of licensed addiction counselors and mental health counselors also provide outpatient treatment for substance use disorders in collaboration with our primary care and psychiatric providers who are trained in medication assisted treatment of alcohol, prescription pain medication and other opioid misuse disorders.

The Dental Clinic focuses on primary care dental services including dental exams, X-rays, cleanings, sealants, varnish applications, fillings, periodontal therapy, simple extractions, etc. We refer those who need crowns or dentures to specialists in the local area. For those needing an emergency extraction or experiencing severe pain or swelling, urgent and same-day appointments are available in the clinic.

You mentioned "clinics." Do you have more than one location?

Yes, we believe it is important to improve access to healthcare services by being where patients are. In addition to our main clinic in central Kalispell, we also have a satellite clinic in Hungry Horse that is open three days a week to provide medical, dental and mental health services. For the convenience of students and their families, Greater Valley provides medical care at two school-based clinics in Kalispell and Evergreen, and mental health services



Medical services

in partnership with Intermountain Children's Services in seven schools in Kalispell, Bigfork and Evergreen.

Is Greater Valley Health Center part of the Flathead City-County Health Department?

Not any longer. The Flathead City-County Health Department opened a medical clinic in the Health Department building in 2003 which later in 2007 became the Flathead Community Health Center. On June 1, 2021, the Health Center split from the County and became an independent entity under the name Greater Valley Health Center. The split was a mutual decision between the health center and the County which gave us more flexibility and options to expand our services. Although we are independent, we are still currently housed in the Health Department building which does create some confusion for some as to whether we are still part of the County.

Why do patients choose your clinics?

Our approach is patient centered, non-judgmental, accessible and integrated. Meaning, we use a cross-functional team that welcomes everyone and focuses not only on the physical, but also the mental and social wellbeing of the patient. We may see a patient for one particular service, but due to our integrated health program, we may identify another issue such as a potential abscessed tooth or a behavioral health concern and can then provide a direct referral to our specialists in dental and mental health that can facilitate necessary services in a shorter amount of time. Greater Valley accepts commercial insurance, Medicare, Medicaid and CHIP. We also offer a sliding fee scale on all of our services for those in financial need.

It sounds like GVHC is unique in this area.

I guess you could say that. We are an independent health care organization providing physical and mental health care under one "roof." To add to that, we acquired Sykes Pharmacy in Kalispell and Columbia Falls on June 1st of this year. Sykes has a similar mission as Greater Valley in their long-

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Dental services

standing dedication of service to the community. Bringing our two organizations together provides benefits to our Greater Valley patients as they can receive significant discounts on their prescriptions at Sykes.

What was your path to CEO of Greater Valley Health Center?

I graduated with degrees in political science and business from Carroll College with no clear career plan. After working in building materials and a major hotel, I was looking for something more fulfilling. My career in healthcare started at a home health agency in Helena where I oversaw the financial operations including patient billing, medical records and patient access. After a stint working for the Montana Education Association and a move back to Flathead County, I went back to the field of home health and added information technology, private care and hospice to my responsibilities. It was my involvement with hospice that was my first experience in integrated care where we provided care not only for the patient, but for their whole family. It made me realize that I could use my education and experience in so many ways in healthcare and that what I wanted to do was to interact with people to give them the support they needed and a positive experience. After working in hospice, I transitioned to what was then North Valley Hospital in Whitefish and served on the Senior Leadership Team for 11 years managing the Planetree program, quality, medical staff services, emergency preparedness and patient safety. It was this variety of experience that led me to become the Executive Director of the Flathead Community Health Center in 2019 and CEO of Greater

Valley Health Center in 2021 where I and our team work to make a positive impact in our community.

Is it still rare for women to be CEOs of healthcare organizations?

It varies by type of health care organization. According to research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association last year, women make up only 15.3% of CEOs in health systems in the US. Montana FQHC's show a different picture whereby 12 out of 14 FQHCs have women at the helm as CEOs. These women have broad backgrounds. Some come up in business services while others have clinical or public health backgrounds.

What do you see for the future of Greater Valley?

I see Greater Valley expanding our range of services and service locations so we can better meet the needs of our growing community. In the near future, we're excited to be launching two new behavioral health programs that will help not only our patients but also the larger community. I see us providing primary care in the context of wellness and helping patients in more substantive ways. Basically... I see Greater Valley Health Center being a good leader and partner to organizations on a similar path and to serve those that need our services throughout Flathead County.

Greater Valley Health Center is located at 1035 1st Avenue West in Kalispell. Hungry Horse Clinic is located at 200 North Street in Hungry Horse. 406-607-4900 - www.greatervalleyhealth.org