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School-based health centers save lives

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Alongside a host of local officials, Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia and staff from the Dr. Robert E. Appleby School-Based Health Centers at Brien McMahon High School celebrated School Based Health Center Month last Friday at McMahon's health center office.

According to state Sen. Bob Duff (D-Norwalk), health centers, like the one at McMahon, are singular in their importance.

"School-based health centers in many ways help save lives," Duff said.

"This is the first line of defense," said State Rep. Chris Perone (D-Norwalk). "It's a stronger support network than I think people realize."

And that support network, Duff and Perone explained, reaches far. The health center staff at McMahon – a combi-

nation of nurse practitioners, physicians' assistants, licensed clinical social workers and administrators – works tirelessly to improve the emotional and physical health of students. Staff members give physicals and immunizations, diagnose and treat illnesses like strep throat and ear infections and provide health education. They also provide counseling for personal problems such as depression, anxiety and drug use.

Jesse White-Frese, executive director for the Connecticut Association of School-Based Health Centers, said, "It [a health center] is like bringing a community of therapists you might see into school. Students come out of class, receive care and then return to class."

And this type of efficient care, White-Frese pointed out, leads to improved learning and higher graduation rates.

"Students bring all of their

health issues to school," she said. "Physical health, mental illness – all of these things certainly impact the student's ability to learn."

Therein, she said, lies the importance of well-funded school based health centers.

According to White-Frese, most of the 78 centers spread across 19 communities in Connecticut receive money through a combination of sources: donations, city allocations and, in large part, the state legislature via the Department of Public Health.

But, she added quickly, "It's not sufficient because the cost of health care is rising...Really the issue is the funding."

The question, then, is straightforward, but by no means simple to answer: How will these centers continue to thrive and draw from the financial resources they require to stay afloat?

According to Congressman

Jim Himes (Conn.-4), the passage of a health care reform package – though such a package is still very much in flux and the source of political fire in Washington – could be a means to bolster school health centers.

At last Friday's celebration, Himes hammered home the point of health care education preventative care.

"Every visit is an opportunity where education can be provided," he said. "It's really teaching students how to take care of themselves."

Though Himes said a reform package is still "strategically on ice," he speculated that 2010 would see a passage of the bill in one of its manifestations.

"There's a lot in the bill for increasing primary care infrastructure and things like nurses education," he said. "I think where this ends up is we put together a slightly less ambitious package."

And with a staggering percentage of adolescents – close to 50 percent, in some cases – in communities like Norwalk lacking primary care, according to Himes, even a slightly less ambitious package is better than nothing.

When asked if it would be better to pass a modified, compromised form of the bill – a bill that would still ultimately work wonders for health care centers across the country – instead of giving up on health care reform entirely, Himes answered "Absolutely. We're at the point where we absolutely have to do something."

"The health care system is a train wreck," he said. "We need to get something done."

For information about local school-based health centers, how to volunteer or to make a donation, call 203-849-1111 or visit <http://www.hscct.org/sbhc.html>.