

Benton Harbor health center expands with federal funds

By [Olivia Pulsinelli | Business Review West...](#)

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During a time when many in Michigan have lost health insurance, Bangor-based [InterCare Community Health Network](#) is working to expand its Benton Harbor health center and help provide care to at-risk populations.

InterCare, a community and migrant health center, last month received an \$8.5 million stimulus grant to help fund its new outpatient facility, which replaces two existing clinics in Benton Harbor.

“Needless to say, we were thrilled beyond words,” said Velma Hendershott, CEO of InterCare. “It was very competitive, so to be awarded that was really quite phenomenal. It’s not very often that you get \$8.5 million infused into the community of Benton Harbor.”

The Department of Health and Human Services awarded the competitive grant, which was one of only two awarded in Michigan. Nationwide, only 85 health centers received the [Facility Investment Program grants](#) out of approximately 600 applicants. The grants ranged from less than \$1 million to \$12 million and totaled nearly \$600 million for major construction and renovation projects.

One of the reasons Hendershott thinks InterCare won a grant is because the planning process for the facility is already well under way. The organization’s board decided to relocate the Benton Harbor facility more than a year ago, and the organization had already purchased the land for the new facility on the corner of State Route 139 and Empire Avenue.

InterCare had been leasing space in Benton Harbor since 1991 and acquired a second space in 2008. However, the new facility will improve patient flow and eliminate inefficiencies associated with having services located in separate spaces, Hendershott said.

“Just having a brand-new, state-of-the-art facility will be a tremendous benefit to the community and to our patients and our staff,” she said. “We’re hoping to move in with the ability to have both electronic dental records and electronic medical records — so that will be very, very exciting.”

The new facility will house three new medical providers, at least three new dental providers and more mental health professionals. InterCare is adding an education room to its new facility, which it hopes to make available to the community for special meetings, health education classes and similar uses.

“We certainly want to involve the community as much as we can, if it’s an appropriate type of request,” Hendershott said. “That’s something we haven’t had the opportunity to do.”

Benton Harbor-based [TERA Architects](#) is designing the plans for the 35,000-square-foot building, and Hendershott expects to break ground sometime around April. She estimates construction to take about a year and create up to 45 full-time construction jobs. St. Joseph-based [Southshore Companies](#) is the project manager.

InterCare is seeking additional funding for the \$10 million facility through the USDA, with a Rural Health Facilities loan.

Another reason Hendershott believes InterCare received the grant was because of the need in the Benton Harbor

area. Between InterCare's six fixed sites and two mobile units covering six counties in Southwest Michigan, the organization serves nearly 50,000 residents and migrants each year. The organization expects patient demand to increase 35 percent in the next few years.

"I think it's just the reality of where we are now as a country — and certainly as a state — in terms of the economy," Hendershott said of the increase in demand for InterCare's services. "We're seeing a tremendous increase in people without health insurance."

Contact Olivia Pulsinelli at oliviap@mbusinessreview.com, or follow her on Twitter [@oliviacp](https://twitter.com/oliviacp).