

# Brownfields Success Story

## A New Home for Affordable Health Care on the Hilltop *Tacoma, Washington*

For decades, fears of contamination from nearby gas stations deterred potential investors from the vacant properties along Martin Luther King Jr. Way in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood.

But a local health care clinic overcame reluctance to redevelop one of these brownfield properties. The clinic snatched up a small corner lot that was the site of an old grocery store, built in 1931 and repurposed over the years as equipment storage and office space. New life was coming to the Hilltop.

Investors wanted to build a larger, multidisciplinary clinic, the Hilltop Regional Health Center. Before redevelopment could happen, the question of possible contamination and what to do about it had to be answered. Enter the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Targeted Brownfields Assessment Program.

### The Opportunity

Community Health Care (CHC), a nonprofit organization providing health services for low-income and uninsured residents in Tacoma and in Pierce County, has had a clinic in the Hilltop neighborhood since 1969. The clinic got its start in the basement of the nurses' convent at nearby St. Joseph Medical Center, where it was staffed by volunteers. In the late 1980s, the Downtown Clinic, as it was known, purchased its own site, where it would remain until 2013.

By the early 2000s, CHC leadership could see that the Downtown Clinic was outgrowing its space. To better meet the needs of this diverse, economically depressed neighborhood, CHC began looking for a new location where it could expand. Eventually, the organization purchased the 1-acre parcel at 1202 Martin Luther King Jr. Way, which was just two blocks away from the existing clinic and had a parking lot.

The site offered another major benefit: The property lies right in the middle of Tacoma's "Medical Mile" between two major regional health centers—MultiCare Health Systems and CHI Franciscan Health.



The new Hilltop Regional Health Center in Tacoma opened in 2013.

**EPA Assistance Recipient:**  
Tacoma-Pierce County  
Health Department

**Assistance Type:**  
EPA Targeted Brownfields  
Assessment

**Former Uses:**  
Grocery store, equipment storage,  
mental health agency and  
college campus

**Current Use:**  
Hilltop Regional Health Center



Shown here is the original grocery store building at 1202 Martin Luther King Jr. Way.



Site preparation began in September 2012 with removal of the old building.

**“From the public health standpoint, CHC will provide increased access to health care in a neighborhood with higher rates of poverty and a high percentage of ethnic minorities. Plus, the area holds great promise for future economic development.”**

*Gregory Tanbara  
Health Promotion  
Coordinator  
Tacoma-Pierce County  
Health Department*

## The Environmental Assessment

Because the site was surrounded by old gas stations, environmental concerns about the soil and groundwater needed to be investigated. Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department had worked with EPA for more than 10 years to assess contamination at former gas stations in the area. In January 2011, the department applied for assistance through EPA's Targeted Brownfields Assessment Program to evaluate CHC's new site. Under this program, designed to help minimize the uncertainties of contamination associated with brownfields, EPA directs a contractor to conduct environmental assessments to address the requestor's needs.

“We made the argument that the EPA assessment would be a worthwhile expenditure of public funds because the project would help increase CHC's capacity to provide health care, especially preventive care, to a lower income neighborhood at a time when the Affordable Care Act was taking shape,” says Gregory Tanbara, health promotion coordinator at Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department.

In April 2011, EPA and its contractor conducted a site visit to assess the old building and surrounding land. Soil borings and temporary groundwater monitoring wells followed in June 2011. By September of that same year, the assessment was completed. The final report brought good news. “The Targeted Brownfields Assessment concluded that no contamination was present,” says Joanne LaBaw, brownfields project manager with EPA Region 10 in Seattle. “Therefore, cleanup was not necessary, and CHC got the green light to proceed.”

## The Fundraising

Even with the contamination question settled, CHC still faced a fundraising challenge to bring the new Hilltop Regional Health Center to life. A \$12 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration jumpstarted the nearly \$26 million project. Russ Sondker, who oversees marketing and resource development for CHC and spearheaded the capital campaign, says the grant advanced the project in two ways. “First,” he says, “it was one of the first donations we received, and it gave the fundraising effort a big boost at the beginning. Second, the grant enabled us to build a larger project, since it significantly increased the amount of funds we could raise.”

Another critical piece of the financing puzzle was new markets tax credits, which enable individual and corporate taxpayers to receive a credit against federal income taxes for investing in qualified community development entities in low-income communities. CHC raised \$7 million in such funds.

Justin Morrill, CHC's capital campaign director, and his team also landed a \$1.5 million grant from the state and an \$800,000 loan from the City of Tacoma through the National Development Council's Grow America Fund. Rounding out the capital campaign were funds from private donors, corporations and private foundations, including 405 individual donations totaling \$1,050,843.

## The Redevelopment

Financing in hand, CHC broke ground in September 2012 with demolition of the old building. And, in just over a year's time, in November 2013, construction was completed.

The new three-story Hilltop Regional Health Center is a mixed-use development that includes medical and dental clinics, a primary care medical residency program, a pharmacy, specialty medical services, internal medicine and obstetrics, pediatrics and urgent care services. Retail space is available at street level. A multistory parking structure was also built on the west portion of the site. There's even a community room that people can use at no charge.

Architecturally, the new facility's brick façade is reminiscent of the old building. The new structure is adjacent to the sidewalk, helping create a more pedestrian-friendly street environment. "The clinic occupies a key intersection in this business district," Tanbara says. "Historic traffic flows hit that corner. Buses stop there. We're looking forward to more than 100 employees and 200 patients and visitors coming and going every day. The clinic will bring more activity to the area. It'll be good for the neighborhood."

In fact, in recognition of the environmental and community-friendly features, the new facility earned silver certification under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) program.

## The Benefits

The new health center is one of the first in the nation to co-locate medical residency and nursing, dental and pharmacy internship programs in one facility, making a cross-disciplinary training environment possible. "Medicine, dentistry and mental health are usually looked at separately," Tanbara says. "In Pierce County, we're focusing on collaboration. This is a key strategy for improving coordinated health care."

In addition to providing health care services, the facility is staffed with medical social workers who can help patients, including non-English speakers, navigate the challenges of dealing with insurance, Medicare and Medicaid.

The new Hilltop Regional Health Center is also taking pressure off of the emergency rooms at the two nearby hospitals and reducing the burden on the health care system. "A lot of people who didn't have insurance went to the emergency rooms," Tanbara says. "You'd see people with diabetes issues and chronic situations turn up in the emergency room. CHC provides a medical home where people can engage in preventive care instead. A visit to CHC might cost \$150 versus a \$1,500 visit to the emergency room. CHC provides an opportunity for a good number of people to approach their health care differently. And that's a good thing."

During construction, the project created more than 250 local jobs, and nearly 140 permanent employees now staff the health care center. Plus, the clinic will serve a total of 17,200 patients annually, 600 percent more than at the old Downtown Clinic.

"The Hilltop neighborhood is an area of rental homes, vacant buildings and poverty," CHC's Sondker says. "This project is the first major investment in the area in many years. Getting the environmental work done on this site will encourage others to do the same. We hope that this clinic and those who it brings to the neighborhood will start a revitalization of the area."



The new building takes shape.



Energy-efficient lighting and natural building materials helped CHC qualify for LEED silver certification.



Jeff Smith, M.D., CHC's medical director, attends to a young patient in the new Hilltop Regional Health Center.

### For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at [www.epa.gov/brownfields](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields) or contact Joanne LaBaw at (206) 553-2594 or [Labaw.Joanne@epa.gov](mailto:Labaw.Joanne@epa.gov).