

Health Pulse

# This Back of the Yards clinic defies headwinds to triple its size

By Jon Asplund

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Credit: Friend Healthcare

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Looming storm clouds for health clinics around the U.S. aren't keeping South Side provider Friend Health from expanding in Back of the Yards to meet rising demand.

The federally qualified health center with six locations has moved from a 5,000-square-foot facility into a new 15,000-square-foot facility in the redeveloped historic Oppenheimer-Goldblatt building at 4700 S. Ashland Ave. The center is part of the United Yards redevelopment and offers primary care, pediatrics, OB-GYN, behavioral health, pharmacy and lab services.

The move comes at a time when many federally qualified health centers — or FQHCs — are gearing up for tougher times ahead, facing the prospect of a steep increase of uninsured, self-pay patients, as rising health insurance premiums hit both Affordable Care Act premiums and employee-sponsored insurance costs and changes to the Medicaid program threaten to cut off millions from care beginning in late 2026.

However, the opportunity to be part of a revitalization of the 47th and Ashland intersection made too much sense

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to pass up, said Friend Health CEO Wendy Thompson.

She said the area needs the community-based, trauma-informed care that Friend Health provides.

"It's clear to us that there's still a dearth of primary care, a desert of accessible, affordable primary care services," Thompson said. "And then when you layer on behavioral health, enabling services, dental, those wraparound services that we know are ideal and necessary to achieve the outcomes that are needed in the community, the dearth is even greater."



Wendy Thompson

"So we are not varying," she said. "We're staying with the very core of what we do. We just know that we will be better equipped to meet the needs of the community, regardless of changes in policy or funding."

When planning for the new center began a few years ago, she said, the site seemed well suited because it was across 47th Street from a Walgreens pharmacy. But in the intervening time, Walgreens announced it would close that location as part of a [nationwide cut in store numbers](#).

That made Friend Health's plans even more vital, Thompson said, as it plans to expand its own pharmacy services at the health center.

The [United Yards](#) development is a mixed-use revitalization plan for the area, which includes senior rentals, retail and Friend Health.

"I'd say the catalyst for this was the very significant investment of the United Yards project," she said. "It's at the heart of the community at the intersection of 47th, Ashland and Archer Avenue. And so what you're seeing is revitalization of businesses and not taking out the small mom and pops that have been there, but actually giving them life."

With retailers including a clothing and a jewelry store, barbershop, cafe and bakery, Thompson said "we're ecstatic about being a part of that. My team and the patients that come into the health center, they patronize all of those establishments."

In addition to expanding capacity in the areas it's always served, the new center adds on same-day immediate care access and plans to bring in dental care in the middle of 2026.

"We have medical professionals that are dedicated to meet the needs of the community when the community needs it," Thompson said of the launch of immediate care. "That is a trend that we are seeing in health care, that individuals want to be seen when they want to be seen. And so we are adjusting to meet that need."

"Likewise, dental," she said. "That is something that definitely is value you add for the community. These are dental deserts. And then when you layer Medicaid or sliding fee scales for those who are uninsured, the number of providers becomes even smaller."

Increasing financial pressures are always a concern, Thompson said, because loss of revenue inevitably leads to access getting restricted.

The focus, therefore, needs to be establishing "good routines of preventative care, because what we know to be true is that if we focus on prevention, then we keep people healthy. And it's much easier to keep people healthy than to intervene or to lessen an illness or a disease. And so that is what we're going to do."

"So if you ask what we're doing, we're fortifying community partnerships, which is why this makes all the sense in the world, because, you know, I don't want to be cliché and say it takes a village," Thompson said. "It's going to take a village because the individuals that we serve who have coverage today, who won't have coverage tomorrow, we're not going to stop serving them."



By Jon Asplund

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