

# Building Community Resilience for the Next Emergency



Sacopee Valley Health Center.

The Sacopee Valley Health Center (SVHC) is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) in Porter, Maine in a rural area near the southern New Hampshire border. SVHC is one of the only primary care providers in the area, serving more than 6,000 patients. With the nearest hospitals about 45 to 60 minutes away, SVHC provides a vital function supporting the health and wellness of their community.

Facing new challenges brought on by weather-related power outages and the COVID-19 pandemic, SVHC leveraged federal funds that were administered by the Western District Coordinating Council and provided from the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention. These funds were dedicated to addressing gaps in the public health system that contributed to health inequities and disparities uncovered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The health center used the funding to enhance its facilities and increase its capacity to better serve the community in times of crisis.

One improvement involved installing an advanced camera system to better communicate with and screen individuals at the entrance of the center, including screening questions, and grant access with the push of a button at the front desk. Previously, the center needed additional staff to manage entry and screening processes, a costly and labor-intensive task. This not only enhanced safety and security, but also resulted in significant cost savings.



Linda Watson (*image at left*), CEO of the health center, said, “We greatly appreciate this improvement. Previously, we needed to hire two staff members solely to manage the lobby door and screen visitors. Now, with these camera systems, our front office staff can handle these tasks efficiently, resulting in significant cost savings.”

The funding also enabled a substantial upgrade to the health center's food pantry that had struggled with capacity issues.

“Our primary focus became how to improve access to food since so many of our patients faced food insecurities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of our patients were experiencing unemployment for the first time, and they were trying to figure out how to navigate systems that they'd never had to use previously,” said Linda.

Previously equipped with a small residential refrigerator and freezer, they now have commercial-grade cold storage, along with more shelving.

Now, the pantry can store and distribute a greater quantity and variety of food, providing critical support to community members facing food insecurity, especially during crises like the pandemic.



Donna, a patient who moved to the area last summer, lives in a town about 15 miles from SVHC with one small grocery store where prices are often double compared to larger grocery store chains. She needed assistance in obtaining affordable food.

When she came to the health center for appointments, “they started giving us bags of groceries to help us out, and hosted community dinners,” she said. “Everybody I meet there is a friend.”

In addition, the center also focused on creating spaces for staff and community members to stay safe and comfortable during emergencies. Recognizing the need for both warming and cooling centers, they equipped these spaces with cots and other necessities for times when staff need to stay overnight due to severe weather or when community members need a place to stay warm or cool during extreme temperatures.

Communication was significantly bolstered by the grant. Linda recalls a recent snowstorm when the health center lost their phone system in one location, and everyone lost cell phone reception. “Our providers were unable to call for rescue if someone was having a medical emergency. We never want that to happen again,” she said.

The new radio system has improved this aspect, supporting reliable communication with emergency responders even when such services aren’t available. This upgrade also equipped the health center’s patient transport van with a mobile transceiver, to stay better connected and respond to emergencies.

SVHC used the funding to focus on what they’ve learned from the pandemic, storms and power outages, and, more importantly, what they need to do for the next emergency.

“During the pandemic we developed new and stronger relationships with the school district, local businesses, and emergency response agencies because we’ve had to rely on each other more than ever before. This funding has allowed us to apply our lessons learned to build a strong foundation and make sure we are fully prepared and effective the next time we face a similar situation.” Linda reflected.

Overall, the funding was instrumental in transforming the center into a more resilient and capable facility. These improvements enhance the center's ability to respond to future emergencies and ensure that it can continue to provide essential services efficiently and safely to community members and support their community partners.

“We’re incredibly proud of the work we do and are committed to meeting the needs of our community. Having this grant was crucial,” said Linda.

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