

Chicago's First Community-Funded Mental Health Center Opens in Irving Park

By [Patty Wetli](#) on October 30, 2014 11:49am | @Pattydnachicago



Executive Director Angela Sedeño handles ribbon-cutting duties at the grand opening of the The Kedzie Center, Chicago's first community-funded mental health clinic. [View Full Caption](#)

IRVING PARK — [The Kedzie Center](#) — Chicago's first mental health clinic paid for directly by the community members it will serve — opened Wednesday in Irving Park, the result of a decade-long advocacy effort that culminated in residents voting to tax themselves in order to fund mental health services.

"What our community did is unprecedented in the city of Chicago," said Sharon Nichols, a resident of Independence Park and board member of the

[Coalition to Save Our Mental Health Centers](#), which led the charge to create The Kedzie Center, 4141 N. Kedzie Ave.

In November 2012, the people of the North River area — Albany Park, Irving Park, North Park and parts of Forest Glen — went to the polls and voted in favor of 0.4 percent property tax increase, or about \$15-\$20 per year for most households, to pay for what would become The Kedzie Center.

Patty Wetli says the state had to intervene to allow neighbors to raise taxes:

"People stepped up," said Michael Snedeker, executive director of the coalition. "The community initiated this and the community funded it."

The long and winding road that led to the opening of The Kedzie Center dates to 2004, when Chicago closed seven of its then-19 city-run mental health centers (six of the remaining 12 were closed in 2012).

Services to all but the most acutely mentally ill fell off the map, Snedeker said.

The coalition sprung into action, working with state legislators to craft the Community Expanded Mental Health Services Act, which Gov. Pat Quinn signed into law in 2011.

The act gives any community in Chicago the authority to establish its own mental health program — as long as residents approve of and fund the plan.

"You're asking people to contribute a little bit to provide a lot," said state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-12th), a lead sponsor of the mental health services act, along with state Rep. Patti Bellock (R-47th) and state Sen. Ira Silverstein (D-8th).

"From beginning to end this bill ... was an exercise in public participation," Feigenholtz said.

Mary Grigar was one of the community members who helped marshal support for the 2012 ballot question, which eventually was approved 74 percent to 26 percent.

"The neatest thing that happened, everyone I called said, 'Yes,'" Grigar recalled.

She was drawn to the fight after learning that services such as the grief counseling her family had received following the death of one her sons were no longer available, particularly for the poor or uninsured.

"I know there's this underlying necessity to keep people stable," Grigar said.

The Kedzie Center will treat members of the North River area (proof of residency will be required), regardless of an individual's ability to pay.

The focus will be on providing preventative treatment and emphasizing mental health as a wellness issue, said Angela Sedeño, executive director of The Kedzie Center.

"It is neither helpful nor humane to provide mental health care only in moments of crisis," said Sedeño, who previously worked at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center.

Surveying the community, "We certainly heard people report depression, routine stress, acculturation issues and youth violence," she said.

In response, the center will offer family, couples and career counseling, as well as treatment for anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress.

"Mental health problems aren't 'out there someplace,' they're in here," said the Rev. Charles Bolser, pastor at St. Viator Parish.

"In every community we have issues of abuse, we have issues of anger. We have brokenness of mind, brokenness of spirit, brokenness of body," he said. "This will be a healing place."

"There is no place else like this," said Nichols, who expressed hope that The Kedzie Center's one-of-a-kind status doesn't last for long.

Communities across Chicago take note, she said: "Our collective voice was heard."