

\$Business *Journal* **Daily**

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Fri, September 16, 2011, 10:02 AM

Meridian Breaks Ground for \$2M Addition



Shovels turn for the ceremonial groundbreaking at Meridian Community Care.

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio -- Larry Moliterno had mixed emotions at Wednesday's groundbreaking ceremony for Meridian Community Care's 12,000-square-foot expansion. "We wanted to celebrate because this is such an important day in the history of our organization," Meridian's president and CEO reflected. "[But] we certainly do not want to celebrate the fact that the demand for the services we provide continues to escalate."

Established in 1972, Meridian, with 204 employees, is undertaking the \$2 million expansion in the latest phase of a project started five years ago to enlarge and renovate its building at 527 N. Meridian Road. The agency provides treats individuals with addiction and mental health issues. The expansion will enable Meridian to expand its outpatient treatment and teen dependency prevention programs, as well as the services it provides local businesses through its WorkLife program,

"Another thing we're trying to do is to reach younger people because the only way you're going to break the cycle of addiction is to start working with kids," Moliterno said.

Meridian treats about 8,000 individuals annually, said Darla Gallagher, chief financial officer and senior vice president.

"We have a waiting list for, I think, every program that we offer," Moliterno said.

Jim Evans, senior vice president of planning, attributed the increased demand for Meridian's services to a couple of factors, including an "opiate epidemic" seen statewide and across the country. Opiates represent about 70% of the addiction treatment Meridian provides, whether alone or in conjunction with some other addiction.

Where five years ago Meridian had about 78 opiate addicts in treatment at any one time, "today we have 500," Evans said.

"It used to be that you could recognize who the opiate addict would be, but today they're my kids, they're your kids. your coworkers," he continued. "It's a very unusual problem that we're starting to see. It's not your typical, preconceived notion of what an opiate addict is."

One element that comes into play is the "unbelievable number" of prescriptions that are being issued, he said. For every resident of Mahoning county, seven prescription pill opiate medications are being issued, an "incredible" amount, Evans said. While there are legitimate uses for those medications, a lot or most get diverted.

Unfortunately, Moliterno noted, heroin is cheaper and purer than it has ever been, making it more attractive and more available. He pointed out that the top cause of accidental deaths in Ohio is no longer car accidents but accidental overdose of prescription opiates.

The construction project launched Wednesday is slated for completion in spring 2012.

While Meridian is grateful for the funding it receives from local mental health and drug and alcohol boards, Moliterno expressed pride that the expansion is almost entirely self-financed. "We don't want to be dependent on the government dollars," he said.

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