

House Republican Press Release

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Keep Heart Center of Greater Waterbury Open to Avoid Public Health Crisis



The Heart Center of Greater Waterbury must be a permanent part of the region's health care community.

The facility, which was approved as a three-year demonstration project in July 2004, was set to be closed down when its trial period came to an end last Saturday (July 19th).

Fortunately for Greater Waterbury heart patients, the state Office of Health Care Access – OHCA - last week agreed to allow the heart center to continue performing primary and elective angioplasty procedures and open heart surgeries for an additional six months while it considers the center's request for a permanent operating permit.

While we thank OHCA for the temporary reprieve it granted the heart center, my legislative colleagues and I believe the high quality of care patients have received at the center over the past three years more than justifies approval of a permanent operating permit – and we said so in a recent letter to the agency.

We agree with physicians and officials of Waterbury Hospital and Saint Mary's Hospital (where patients associated with the center are treated) that ending the program would create a public health crisis in the region.

Thousands of heart patients could be put at risk and some whose lives would be saved if the heart center remains open could die if the center is closed and they have to be transported to another hospital while in the throes of a heart attack.

It was not so long ago that Greater Waterbury heart attack victims had to be transported to the Hospital of Saint Raphael in New Haven, Yale-New Haven Hospital or Bridgeport Hospital for treatment.

Although heart attack patients receive excellent care at all three of those facilities, experience has shown that delays in treatment time make it less likely that patients suffering from acute heart attacks will survive – and that those who do face a higher risk of permanent disability.

Granting the Heart Center of Greater Waterbury a permanent operating permit will significantly reduce those risks for area heart attack victims.

The main obstacle to granting a permanent operating permit could be the benchmark set by OHCA for open heart surgeries over a three-year period when it approved the demonstration project four years ago.

Although the center has exceeded by more than 50 percent the benchmark for angioplasties set by OHCA, it has only achieved about 63 percent of its patient volume target of 950 open heart surgeries.

While the volume targets are based on recommendations from the American College of Cardiology, the center's clinical outcomes for open heart surgeries meet and in most cases exceed all Society of Thoracic Surgery and American College of Cardiology standards, according to Dr. Steven Schneider, vice president of medical affairs for Waterbury Hospital.

As it considers whether to approve the heart center's application for permanent status, OHCA should give more weight to the heart center's record of positive outcomes for the operation than it does to the number of them it has performed.

As a person whose family history suggests I am at risk for a heart attack, should I ever need open heart surgery, I would prefer that it take place at a hospital that has a superior record of success for the procedure than at one that simply has done more of them.