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L+M Cancer Center holds grand opening

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Waterford — The Lawrence + Memorial Cancer Center evoked words like "swag," "awesome," and "grand slam" during the grand opening ceremony Wednesday that celebrated both the completion of the striking 50,000-square-foot structure off Parkway South and the major advance in cancer care it promises to provide to the region.

"For cancer patients, the environment they're treated in makes a big difference, and this is an environment that's warm and welcoming and supportive," said Dr. Lawrence Shulman, chief of staff and vice president for medical affairs at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, partners with L+M in the center. "This is an incredible building."

About 400 community leaders, hospital staff, board members and donors attended the ceremonies, which began with tours of the two-story, \$34.5 million structure followed by a 45-minute speaking program and reception. Completed in 15 months and including a geothermal heating system and other environmentally friendly features, the building will receive its first patients on Oct. 1.

"I can't tell you how exciting this is for us and for the patients in our community," said Laura Harrington, oncology nurse, as she led a tour group through the chemotherapy infusion area, pointing out the large private patient chambers with large windows overlooking the 100-acre wooded site.

Bruce Cummings, L+M president and chief executive officer, recalled that the project began in response to what the community identified to him as one of the top two needs for improvement at L+M shortly after he began his tenure as head of the hospital eight years ago. The other was an upgrade of the Emergency Department. The partnership with Dana-Farber, the first in Connecticut, came about through "serendipity," he recalled, after he visited a Dana-Farber partner hospital in Massachusetts for a different reason and became intrigued by the idea of affiliating with the renowned Boston-based institute.

Replacing an 8,000-square-foot cancer center at the main hospital in New London, the new center befits a region with a dubious distinction — Connecticut has one of the highest cancer rates in the nation, and New London County has the highest rate in the state, speakers noted.

Staffing the center will be 73 employees — 47 moving from the main hospital, 13 physicians from Dana-Farber and the two other partners, Yale-New Haven Hospital and Women & Infants Hospital, and 13 from Oncology & Hematology Associates in New London.

Dr. Richard Hellman, from Oncology & Hematology, is the medical director at the new facility.

"Our most important work begins now," said Hellman, referring to the treatments that will be provided at the new center. It will offer services previously available to patients only if they traveled outside southeastern Connecticut to academic medical centers in Boston, New Haven or New York, such as access to clinical trials, new drug therapies and collaborations between top specialists and community hospital oncologists, he said. Genetic counseling, nutrition and dietician services will be among the support services at the center.

"Next month, comprehensive cancer care will take a giant step forward," Hellman said.

More than half of the cost of the building has been raised through donations, and fundraising continues. William Stanley, vice president of development and community relations, announced at the end of the ceremony that the Dominion Foundation, the charitable arm of the company that owns the Millstone Power Station, had just committed \$50,000 toward the project.

With meticulous attention to design details, inspired by brainstorming sessions with former cancer patients, physicians and others, the new building was conceived as a space of "healing, wholeness and comfort," speakers said.

"My hope is that people who walk into this building scared, nervous and uncertain about their future and scared about their life are going to get a feeling of serenity, and of assurance of the competent care they'll receive," said Dr. Suzanne Evans, assistant professor at Yale Medical School and director of radiation oncology at the new center.

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