At a recent groundbreaking for Mercy LIFE in Norristown are, from left, Cathy Judge Cardillo, Director of Pennsylvania Advocacy, Trinity Health; Robert Ochs, Owner, CID Group; Michael Vereline, Silverang Development Company; Dan J. Drake, Senior Vice President, Continuing Care, Mercy Health System and Suzanne Januszeski, Regional Director of Operations, Mercy LIFE

NORRISTOWN >> Twenty four years after Sacred Heart Hospital closed forever, the doors are reopening to a different approach to wellness under another Catholic health care system.

Mercy Health Care administrators describe the new Mercy LIFE Norristown facility at 1430 Dekalb St. as “a welcoming place for seniors 55 and over to receive medical, nutritional, social and spiritual services, while being transported safely to and from their own homes.”
With Mercy Health having formerly operated Mercy Suburban Hospital in East Norriton until 2015, when it was sold to Prime Healthcare Services and became Suburban Community Hospital, the former Sacred Heart Hospital, currently being renovated and set to open in August, will mark a homecoming of sorts for the health network that was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1986.

“We really never wanted to leave the Norristown area and we wanted to get back there to serve that community,” said Dan Drake, senior vice president of continuing care, Mercy Health System.

Drake explained that Mercy LIFE is part of Mercy Health’s Continuing Care system, which also includes Mercy Home Health, covering in-home visits in Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Philadelphia counties.

Established in 1998, Mercy LIFE is a nationally recognized program providing these services to older adults without co-payments.

“Not everybody in the Mercy LIFE program is elderly, but the concept is to serve the frail elderly in the community where they live instead of them going to a nursing home. There are a lot of people who lack these services, so we’re really happy to be pretty much in the center of Norristown with this new center,” he said.

The nonprofit Mercy organization, which is part of Michigan-based Trinity Health, noted that it is investing $6 million into a program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) model of care for more than 3,000 Medicare and Medicaid eligible seniors in the region.

In addition to Medicare and Medicaid, there is also a private pay component, allowed Drake, who said that Mercy LIFE clients will benefit from immediate assistance from an on-site team without the typical waiting period for a medical appointment or prescription refill, or the costly co-pays that often accompany these services.

The facility, which will be similar to Mercy LIFE operations in Philadelphia, Elwyn and Sharon Hill, will offer primary care and physician specialist services; nursing care; rehabilitation therapy; dental, vision, hearing and foot care; medical equipment; home care; home-delivered meals; mental health and social work services; caregiver support; personal emergency response systems, plus transportation, recreational and social programs.

“We’ll have adult day services for medical management and for socialization Monday through Friday,” Drake said. “We’re pretty much a morning to 5 p.m. operation, so the great thing for Norristown is that we’re not clogging up the streets night and day, but then we provide home care for the participants. It’s a great thing for them and their families, who are used to taking mom and dad to a cardiologist one day, a general practitioner the next day. We have all our practitioners go to that location. So you could see your physicians, have lunch and then go home.”

LIFE facilities elsewhere have shown to be an extremely effective model of care, Drake noted.

“Politicians on both sides support it because it saves money over people going to a nursing home, plus they’re getting quality care while staying in their homes, where they want to be. It’s the best of both worlds. You’re getting the medical management and socialization in one place, but at the end of the day you’re sleeping in your own home. Most of the people in our program have lived in their neighborhoods for 30-plus years. The other good thing," Drake added, "is that we’re bringing a lot of opportunity to Montgomery County for jobs. In most of our centers employees live within 10 miles of the centers, and we’ve already hired some people who live close to the Norristown center. So this will be a real positive thing for Montgomery County.