

Jefferson County Community Dental Clinic looking to future

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Friday, October 23, 2015 9:47 am

For people with limited financial means, paying for dental care can be a big challenge. Fortunately, help is available.

Since opening its doors in 2007, the Jefferson County Community Dental Clinic has provided dental care at a reduced fee to low-income residents or those who have no insurance.

Last year, the clinic served 4,077 people, more than 1,100 of whom had no dental insurance. Services included dental examinations and X-rays, routine cleanings, fillings/restorations, extractions, treatment of abscesses and oral health education.

An open house was held Thursday at the clinic, located at 520 Handeyside Lane in Fort Atkinson, to promote use of the facility and unveil plans for future expansion.

Community Dental Clinic Board of Directors member and Fort Memorial Hospital Foundation executive director Dwight Heaney discussed future plans for the clinic.

“I’m sure many of you have never seen this before because, as an organization, this is the first time we’re doing something like this: to invite people in and see our facility and learn more about our mission and the impact we have for our community,” he said.

Heaney noted that at Fort HealthCare, a primary mission is improving the healthcare of the community. He said a lot of that is through collaboration.

“It didn’t take long for me to understand just how important this place is for the people that rely on it for care,” Heaney said of the Community Dental Clinic.



SMILES ALL AROUND

SMILES ALL AROUND — An open house was held Thursday at the Jefferson County Community Dental Clinic. Located at 520 Handeyside Lane in Fort Atkinson, the clinic provides dental care at a reduced fee for those with limited financial means or without insurance coverage. Clinic board members unveiled plans for future expansion to include more space to treat pediatric patients and service, including dental surgery. For more photos, [click here](#). — Daily Union photos by Ryan Whisner.

The clinic looks like any regular dentist's office into which a patient might walk.

"These people are getting that same great level of care," Heaney said.

The problem the clinic now faces is the growing number of patients who come to the clinic with very serious dental issues that require surgery.

"Finding people to do dental surgery without being paid for very low rates is difficult," Heaney said.

In response, Fort HealthCare will be launching a surgical dentistry program for uninsured patients. Dentists at the clinic will be able to book time in a Fort HealthCare operating room to take care of those surgical needs.

"We believe that investing in this service will take us another step toward being a healthier community," Heaney said.

He said the group is in the process of putting together fundraising for the project and the list of needs to make it come together.

"As a board, we talked about how to approach this," Heaney said.

The open house was the first opportunity to gather people together to unveil the plan. Heaney encouraged people to stop at the clinic and learn more about it.

He said the clinic also is looking into the feasibility of expanding its space to better treat the pediatric patients.

"There is a continuing need for dentistry," said Dr. Brian Turley, clinic board chairman. "This project is really near and dear to a lot of our hearts. There is a great team here doing a great service for our county and surrounding communities."

Turley noted that in 2002, nurse Debra Gatzke asked him about access to dental care in Jefferson County. He recalled his response indicating that it was less than adequate, although his terminology was a little stronger than that.

"One thing led to another and our group kind of coalesced from all walks of life," Turley said.

The clinic was born out of a partnership with the Jefferson County Health Department and Fort HealthCare.

Jefferson County Health Department director Gail Scott helped write a grant that the group received from the Medical College of Wisconsin. The \$50,000 was to be used to study the issue of dental care for low-income residents in the Jefferson County area.

"We got a lot of good statistics from that," Turley said.

From that point, he said, area dentists started talking about how they could start volunteering to treat some of the people who needed dental care, but were unable to afford it.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society in Lake Mills offered use of a facility on its property for a \$1 per month.

Turley said a group of volunteers started renovating the building in hopes of making a dental clinic there. Funding was limited and the number of volunteers was insufficient to really get the project to move forward.

Meanwhile, several dental offices around the county were holding mini community clinics after hours to serve those in need.

“We treated maybe 75 people in those several months,” Turley recalled.

As additional resources were sought, the group landed a \$425,000 grant from Delta Dental of Wisconsin.

Clinic director Barb Morrison Gudgeon was hired in 2006 to help coordinate the efforts. Fort HealthCare provided the current space at \$1 per year.

Turley said in that first year with limited hours and everything being done on a volunteer basis, the clinic treated 31 patients.

The clinic’s initial business model faltered as the number of patients was far less than anticipated and the use of the volunteer time was difficult to maintain the hours.

Borrowing from other similar community dental clinics, the group adjusted the model to allow them to be able to hire dentists and other staff.

“This year, we are on mark to treat more than 5,000 patients,” he said.

Turley, who volunteers his time at the clinic, described the effort as a “really cool project.

“It is a great team, great work and very appreciative patients,” he said. “It is a pretty big high to work here, whether it is at the front desk or volunteering in the back doing dentistry or sitting and talking with patients.”

Gudgeon agreed.

Having been in the dental field for 39 years, she said that working at the clinic has been her most rewarding job.

“When I come through that door every day, I think, ‘OK, let’s just try and make the difference in one person’s life today,’” the director said.

By 8:05 a.m., all six rooms are filled, she noted.

Gudgeon shared how recently, the Whitewater Unified School District called about a 16-year-old homeless girl with a tooth abscess, a bacterial infection. A periapical tooth abscess usually occurs as a result of an untreated dental cavity, injury or prior dental work.

“I said, ‘yes, get her in right away,’” Gudgeon said. “That is just one phone call. There are constant phone calls and people walking through the door.”

She has picked up patients from the hospital who have an abscess and takes them to the clinic.

“It is just those little things that say every day we’re making a difference and that’s important,” Gudgeon said.

Thus far in 2015, the clinic director said, the clinic has treated 4,622 patients, including 915 new patients.

“At a private practice, if you have one new patient per week, you’re jumping up and down; we get 20 new patients in three hours,” Gudgeon said.

For those 4,600 patients, the clinic provided a total of 14,162 procedures, including cleanings, X-rays, fillings, extractions, root canals and exams.

Gudgeon said 3,849 patients have medical assistance, while 773 have no insurance.

To receive care, patients must reside in Jefferson County, have an income of 200 percent of the federal poverty level or less, have no dental insurance or are not eligible to receive dental services through the ForwardHealth Insurance Card.

The most difficult part of job for the clinic is keeping it funded, Gudgeon said.

The gross production to date in 2015 is \$1,630,313 and the clinic has to write off \$1,206,425, leaving a difference of \$423,888.

Gudgeon said the clinic does not always get that amount back, as sometimes insurance won’t pay for a procedure or sometimes the patients just can’t afford it.

The Community Dental Clinic receives funding from Delta Dental Insurance, the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties, Watertown Area United Way and the Wisconsin Dental Association, as well as individuals and community groups.

“Our patients really care; they want to be an active part of society and pay for what they are getting,” Gudgeon said, noting that patients will do whatever they can to pay.

Throughout its eight years of service, there have been only a handful of instances in which checks are written on accounts with insufficient funds.

“With donations, grants and the support we get from different organizations, that is the only way we can keep our doors open,” she said.

The clinic operates on Monday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Tuesday, 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Friday, 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information or an appointment, call the clinic at (920) 563-4372.