

Grant allows for CommuniCare dental expansion

By Crystal Lee | Enterprise staff writer | March 18, 2010 08:37



Davis Community Clinic's new dental operatory, renovated from its prior use as an office, was shown off to the public at an open house on Tuesday. From left are dentist Farideh Tabarsi; Barry Chang, CommuniCare dental director; Sherry Cauchois, chief financial officer; Robin Affrime, chief executive officer; and Richard Soohoo, Sutter Davis Hospital chief financial officer. Fred Gladdis/Enterprise photo

CommuniCare Health Centers' Davis Community Clinic has expanded its dental program to accommodate an ever-growing need for low-cost, professional dental services.

The Davis clinic had an open house Tuesday to showcase its latest addition, a fourth examination room, that will allow the clinic to serve more dental patients.

The conversion of an office to operatory was completed in November with \$18,574 from a federal stimulus grant.

CommuniCare Chief Executive Officer Robin Affrime said the project was a long time coming and it was only a matter of finding the funding.

Last year, the dental program served 6,369 individual patients with a total of 13,171 visits at the four Yolo County sites. That means the program provided 28 percent more dental services in 2009 compared to

2008, when there were 10,277 dental visits to the clinics.

CommuniCare, a private nonprofit, has clinics in Davis, Woodland, West Sacramento and Esparto to provide comprehensive health care services to low-income and uninsured county residents.

There are some paid staff members, but the programs rely greatly upon community volunteers, Affrime said.

The dental program alone is staffed by four dentists and a hygienist, plus a general dentistry resident and about six regular volunteer dentists this year, who rotate through the clinic sites, Development Director John Bonner said. The number of volunteers fluctuates, but more is always needed, he said.

The need is even greater in the current economic climate, said Dr. Barry Chang, the program's dental director. Chang said it may be because dentists are spending more time at their practices to keep up with financial demands, leaving less time for volunteerism.

Fewer volunteers has meant the Thursday night dental clinic, which serves patients who cannot make it to appointments during daytime working hours, can no longer be open once a week, Chang said. It is now open about twice a month, he said.

Additionally, patients usually have to wait one to two months for dental care because the clinic is so booked up, he said.

'The volunteers really help us to get these wait times down,' he said. It is important, he said, to

provide professional dental care to patients who need it, but cannot afford it.

The program's services also extend beyond the clinic locations. During the school year, CommuniCare visits Yolo County pre-schools and elementary schools to provide dental screenings, sealants, fluoride varnish and oral health education for children.

Often, it is the first time the children have seen a dentist or learned how to care for their teeth, Bonner said. In 2009, the Smile Savers Dental Outreach program treated 5,094 kids in Davis, Woodland, West Sacramento, Winters and Esparto.

'Many of these kids are going to class in pain, and it makes it hard for them to focus on anything at all,' Bonner said.

The Davis clinic opened in 1972, and the CommuniCare dental program was established in 1990. Primary care visits account for about 70 percent of the CommuniCare's services, perinatal care 16 percent and dental 14 percent.

CommuniCare also provides behavioral health services and health education.

In 2008, 80 percent of patients were at or below the federal poverty level, and 41 percent were uninsured.

- Reach Crystal Lee at clee@davisenterprise.net or (530) 747-8057. Comment on this story at www.davisenterprise.com

315 G Street · Davis, CA 95616 · Main Office:(530)756-0800 · Circulation (530)756-0826 · FAX: (530)756-6707

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