

## Cooperative dental effort is one of the largest in the U.S.

Deirdre Cox Baker | Posted: Friday, April 20, 2012 6:00 am

A community collaboration that one area official says may be the largest of its kind in the United States is taking place in the Quad-Cities, with several thousand needy children as the beneficiaries.

In only nine months, 2,675 young patients have been seen by dental hygienists or dentists as part of a cooperative effort that involves the Give Kids A Smile program in Illinois and the I-SMILE initiative in Iowa.

The Quad-City outreach is run by Bethany for Children & Families, a Moline-based social service agency which also coordinates a new dental bus that visits at least 20 school districts around the region.

The aim of offering care to under-served children was originally a project of the American Dental Association. It was begun 11 years ago as a one-day-per-year effort to help patients in dental offices, often on the first week in February.

That practice has now expanded to include thousands of eligible children in a year-round program that combines both preventative and restorative care.

In this area, much of the preventative care is done on the dental bus. Restorative work — if a cavity or infection is found, for example — is done in the offices of 94 volunteer dentists around the Quad-Cities.

The long-term goal is to reach the generation of children younger than 18 years and teach them about responsible dental care so they will know how to teach sound dental practices to their own sons and daughters.

“We want to empower the children to take control of their dental care,” said Dr. Jim Bishop, who has a dental practice in Moline and has been involved in the outreach effort from the beginning. “We want them to have a mind-set of the best home-care habits.”

The eligible children are mainly on lists for free- and reduced-price lunches at their schools, said Bill Steinhauser, the president and CEO of Bethany. The organization bills Medicaid for the services rendered to program participants, he explained.

Biggest in U.S.

The scope of the Quad-City area program appears to be the largest such project in the United States, Steinhauser said. There’s a comparable effort in Texas, but that is privately financed by Michael Dell, the computer entrepreneur. There is also a dental outreach program among seven counties in Alabama, but that does not have the same level of volunteer involvement by dentists, he added.

This region’s effort really took off in the Quad-Cities, Bishop agreed, and the partnership with Bethany is like a “wonderful marriage,” he added.

Bethany began offering the bus service in October and that helps address transportation needs for the children. More than 15,000 children in the Quad-Cities are thought to lack access to dental care, and that is often because of schedules, reimbursement rates to providers and transportation issues, Bishop explained.

The Quad-City outreach illustrates wide, bistate cooperation — including the health departments of Scott and Rock Island counties and Community Health Care Inc., which operates federally funded dental clinics in Davenport and Rock Island that handle many of the young patients who require restorative care.

The outreach is expected to double next school year, Steinhauser said.

The aim is ultimately to reach 10,000 children or more. “We are discovering there is more need than we anticipated,” he said.

Challenges remain

One of the project’s biggest challenges is getting parental consent forms to, and back from, parents. That’s easier with younger children and more of an issue where older students are concerned, organizers said, agreeing that the number of young children who are seen by dentists and hygienists outweighs those from the high school ranks.

Adding to the importance of the program is that at least some states require public school students to have dental checkups. In Iowa, children entering kindergarten and ninth grade must prove that they have seen a dentist, said Briana Boswell, the I-SMILE coordinator for the Scott County Health Department.

Boswell, who is also on Bethany’s dental advisory board, said the difficulty with the consent forms is being addressed, though. One idea, now in the pilot stage, is to mail the forms directly to parents using labels from the school districts and Bethany’s postage rate as a not-for-profit entity.

And a relatively high number of children need follow-up restorative care by one of the volunteer dentists. That rate was about 50 percent at first, but it has since fallen to the 30 percent to 40 percent range.

By comparison, in Bishop's private practice, about 20 percent of his patients need restorative care.

As for the challenge of coordinating schedules, Bethany's Steinhauser said, "We learn daily how to do this better," making note of the wide variety of school calendars.

#### Bright spots

Officials involved in the outreach effort are pleased with the project's success. Steinhauser believes good dental care will lead to a longer life span for the patients.

"The health of our mouths plays a huge role in the health of our bodies," said Sue Ickes, the school nurse at Bowlesburg Elementary School in Silvis, which is part of the East Moline School District. Bowlesburg is one of the schools the dental bus visited in March.

Ickes has been involved in dental outreach for about a decade and describes the new initiative as both welcome and effective. A large number of Bowlesburg students needed dental care just a few years ago, but that total has recently decreased.

"Now the big thing is to see how follow-up care goes," she added.

Bishop is among the 94 volunteer dentists in the Quad-Cities, and he believes the large number of helpers exists because dentists established a sense of camaraderie in the community years ago.

"Basically, we have been a very, very non-competitive, cohesive group for a very long time," he added.

With 25 years of experience, Bishop is advising younger dentists about the volunteer opportunities.

"I'm so proud of them. We ask them for help and they don't bat an eye. They just agree," he said.