

VIRGINIA'S DENTAL SAFETY NET: STRIVING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE UNINSURED AND UNDERSERVED

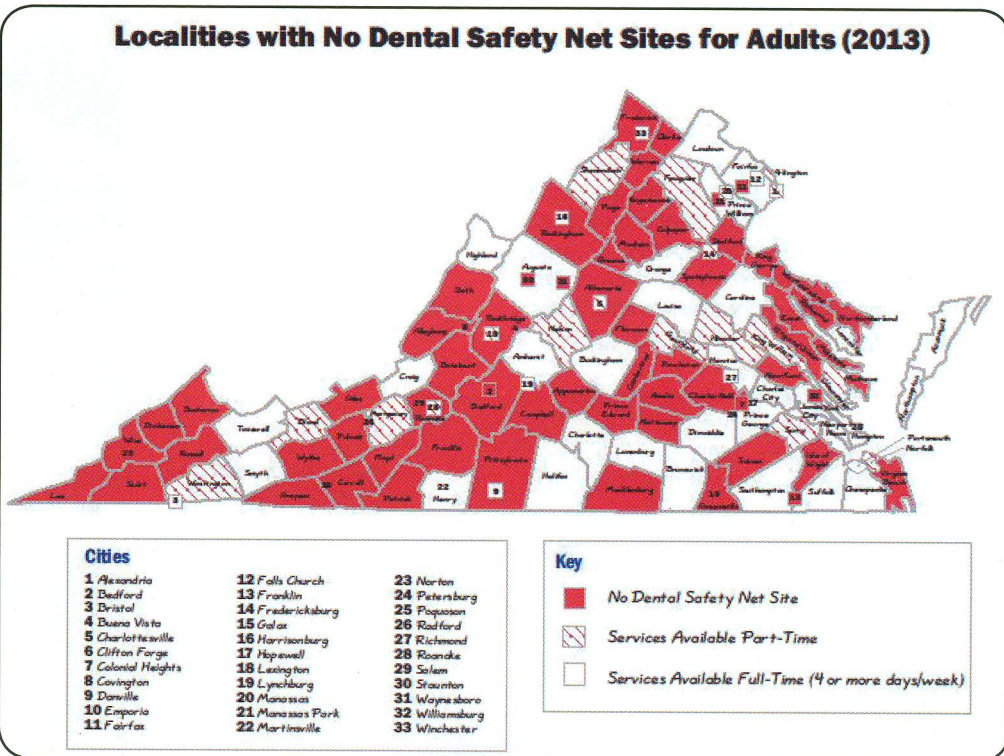
By Tracey A. Van Marcke, Dental Opportunities Champion, Virginia Health Care Foundation



The percentage of Americans who lack dental insurance from a private or public source is a staggering 47%, according to the National Association of Dental Plans (2012). This far exceeds the number of medically uninsured, yet is discussed much less frequently in the press.

The sweeping reform of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act did little to expand dental insurance for the uninsured.

Despite this overwhelming need, 70 localities in Virginia do not have a dental safety net (DSN) facility. It is no wonder that access to dental care has become the top priority in many local community needs assessments.



Dr. David Crouse, one of the more than 500 dentists that volunteered in free clinics last year, shows a patient her new smile.

Funding the Dental Safety Net

The Virginia Health Care Foundation (VHCF) has worked for many years in collaboration with the Virginia Dental Association (VDA), the VCU School of Dentistry, and a host of community organizations to increase the size and capacity of the Commonwealth's DSN. Over the last 15 years, VHCF has devoted more than \$9.5 million to this endeavor, making it the largest funder of the dental safety net in Virginia.

Early grants supported the VCU School of Dentistry's mobile outreach program and school-

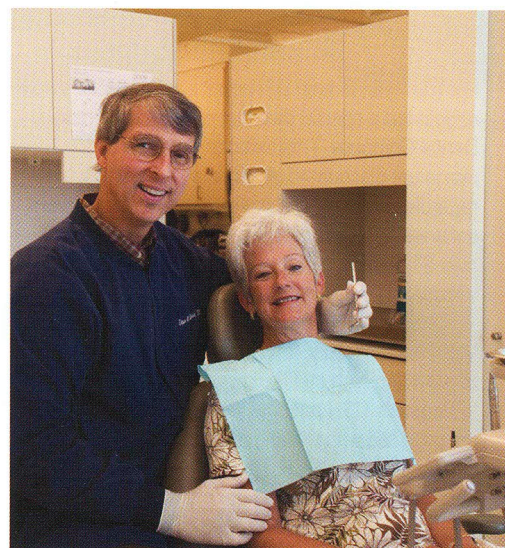
based services in underserved Accomack County. Since then, VHCF has partnered with the VDA to fund operatories and seed money for its Missions of Mercy (MOM). It has also stimulated the development or growth of 43 DSN sites with financial assistance for start-up and expansion costs.

VHCF will have the ability to fund a significant expansion of the DSN over the next several years, thanks to a recent \$1 million challenge grant from the Delta Dental of Virginia Foundation (DDVF), and the corresponding match to be raised. VHCF was one of 36 organizations across the Commonwealth to receive one of DDVF's inaugural oral health grants.

A Snapshot of the DSN

Currently, Virginia's DSN is comprised of 76 community-based dental clinics, located in 63 localities. This includes 27 sites at community health centers providing services to children and adults, 35 free and charitable clinics serving adults only, and 14 additional clinics that are freestanding or affiliated with other organizations. Many of these treat patients of all ages.

Some DSN clinics, particularly free clinics, provide care entirely with volunteers. These volunteers include local dentists, dental students working under the supervision of community dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants. Services are rendered either at the clinic, or in the volunteer's private office.



Adult and pediatric patients are appreciative of the care they receive in DSN clinics.

Other DSN clinics provide dental services by employing a full or part-time dentist. This structure is often used in rural areas, where fewer dentists are available to volunteer. The dentist's salary is typically supported through a combination of patient revenue (per visit fee), insurance revenue (Medicaid), and grants from organizations like VHCF.

Providing Support to the Dental Safety Net

Operating a DSN clinic under any model is

Continued on page 30

Continued from page 29

challenging. That is why VHCF provides far more to Virginia's DSN than money. It also makes a range of technical assistance, resources, and tools that reduce costs available.

A series of VHCF guidebooks called, "Models that Made It," provide assistance to clinics based on successful programs within Virginia's own DSN. One example is the "70/30" model first developed at Augusta Regional Dental Clinic. This approach is based on the concept that in order to provide care to uninsured adults in a financially sustainable manner, 70% of the appointment mix must be reimbursed by Medicaid or FAMIS to support the remaining 30% of appointments.

DSN dentists and administrators are empowered to network and share best practices through VHCF's *Tooth Talk Roundtable*, and its corresponding online forum. These gatherings also provide an opportunity for experts like the Virginia Oral Health Coalition to present up-to-date information on a host of issues relevant to the DSN.

Interactions with DSN providers enable VHCF staff to identify further opportunities for education and support. As needs are identified, VHCF's Dental Opportunities Champion, a position generously funded by the Delta Dental of Virginia Foundation, works to address them through various initiatives and programs.

For example, to help DSN clinics lower costs, VHCF negotiated a special discount with the Patterson Dental Company. This extends Patterson's maximum discount to all Virginia DSN clinics, regardless of size, and covers supplies, equipment, software, and service calls. Through this program, over \$1.16 million in expenses has been saved by Virginia's DSN since 2007.

VHCF's Larell OneStep Denture Initiative is aimed at providing high quality, lower cost dentures to Virginia's DSN patients. Safety net dentists are provided with training and startup supplies, underwritten by VHCF. This enables them to provide dentures to a greater number of patients, and has even allowed some DSN clinics to offer dentures for the first time.

A comprehensive listing of DSN services is maintained by VHCF, (www.vhcf.org), and accessed by Virginians in need every day. Despite the wonderful work happening in Virginia's 76 existing DSN clinics, they are only scratching the surface of the overwhelming need that exists for the many low income Virginians without dental insurance.

How You Can Help

VDA members are integral to the success of the Commonwealth's DSN, and most have found involvement to be very rewarding. Please consider engaging in one of the following ways:

1. Contact your local free clinic to volunteer on-site, or to see DSN patients in your own office.
2. If you don't have a local clinic, why don't you convene some local dentists and start one? Or, contact community leaders and offer support if they are interested in starting one.
3. Volunteer as a preceptor for dental students providing care in DSN clinics.
4. Contribute your time to a MOM project, or help organize one in your community.
5. Consider donating supplies or desirable equipment to a clinic, when you replace items in your office.
6. If you do not have the time to engage personally, consider supporting the DSN financially through the Virginia Health Care Foundation, the Virginia Dental Association Foundation, your local DSN clinic, or all of the above.

Tracey van Marcke is the Dental Opportunities Champion at the Virginia Health Care Foundation. This position has been generously underwritten by Delta Dental of Virginia since 2006.



Safety net dentists are being trained to use Larell OneStep dentures, and the patient is pleased with the results.

