



DENTAL SAFETY NET

PROGRESS IS EVIDENT, YET OVERWHELMING NEED REMAINS IN VIRGINIA

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A wise Miguel de Cervantes once said, “Every tooth in one’s head is more valuable than a diamond”. Unfortunately, many Virginians are unable to obtain needed treatment for their “jewels”, because they can’t afford it and they don’t have dental insurance. It’s no wonder that access to oral health care is a top issue in many community health needs assessments throughout the state!

The Virginia Health Care Foundation (VHCF) has long recognized the correlation between good oral health and a person’s overall health and well-being. As a result, VHCF has collaborated regularly with the Virginia Dental Association, the VCU School of Dentistry, and a host of community organizations to increase the size and capacity of the Commonwealth’s Dental Safety Net (DSN). Over the last 20 years, VHCF has invested more than \$15 million to this endeavor, making it the largest funder of the DSN in Virginia.

Early grants supported the VCU School of Dentistry’s mobile dental unit and Accomack County’s school-based dental services on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. Since then, VHCF has funded operatories and provided seed money for many of the VDA’s Mission of Mercy (MOM) projects. VHCF has also stimulated the development or growth of 53 DSN sites with grants for start-up and expansion costs. Today, there are 67 localities with dental safety net clinics. While great progress has been made, there are still 66 localities without one.

Most of the state’s DSN clinics are in community health centers or free clinics. Free clinics provide care primarily with volunteers. These include local dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants,

and dental students working under the supervision of community dentists. Services are rendered either at the clinic, or at the volunteer’s practice. Community health centers and several 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/FAMIS programs), and grants from organizations like VHCF.

Operating a DSN clinic under any model is 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. 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 initiative, over \$2.3 million in expenses has been saved by Virginia’s DSN in the past 11 years.

VHCF also is the “go to” source for Virginians seeking DSN care. It maintains a comprehensive on-line listing of DSN services at www.vhcf.org, which is

consulted by Virginians in need every day. In fact, it is one of the most frequently visited pages on VHCF’s website.

Despite the growth of Virginia’s DSN clinics and the difference they are making for so many, they are only scratching the surface of the overwhelming need that exists for those without the capacity to pay the full cost of oral health care.

VDA members are integral to the success of the Commonwealth’s DSN. Many are involved and have found participation to be very rewarding. Please consider engaging in at least one of the following ways:

1. Contact your local free clinic to volunteer on-site, or to see DSN patients in your office.
2. Volunteer as a preceptor for dental students providing care in DSN clinics.
3. Contribute your time to a MOM project, or help organize one in your community. VHCF will give \$10,000 to seed one in a locality that hasn’t had one before.
4. If there isn’t a DSN clinic in your locality, consider convening some of your dental colleagues and start one. Or, contact community leaders and offer support if they are interested in starting one.
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, please consider supporting the DSN financially through the Virginia Dental Association Foundation, the Virginia Health Care Foundation, your local DSN clinic, or all of the above.