

# The Role of Free Dental Programs in Care Provision for the Underserved

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Of the approximately 4,000 licensed dentists in North Carolina, only 24% accept Medicaid reimbursement for dental services to any appreciable degree. Therefore, for the 1.5 million citizens of the state currently enrolled in the Medicaid program,<sup>2</sup> there are less than 1,000 dentists statewide from whom they may seek treatment. This translates into one dentist per 1,500 Medicaid recipients. Factoring in those who do not qualify for Medicaid, yet are unable to afford dental treatment, it may be noted that the number of available dentists to treat the underserved population, in private practice, is inadequate. Additionally, other factors, such as (mal)distribution of dentists, and location of clinics, add to the difficulties for the underserved, further reducing their ability to access needed dental care. Anecdotal information from dental Medicaid providers frequently

to serving low-income patients who have limited access to dental care. These safety net clinics include public health, community health centers, and free clinics.<sup>3</sup> Although it is somewhat difficult to ascertain the exact number of free dental clinics or programs with a free dental component, of the 63 members of the North Carolina Association of Free Clinics, 21 list dental care as a component of their overall program.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 shows the number of free dental components among 58 out of 63 members of the North Carolina Association of Free Clinics (NCAFC). Although these figures represent only those clinics who are members of NCAFC, they do offer some perspective on the amount of time, services, and equivalent dollar amounts donated toward dental needs, which comprise only 3.6% of overall visits to the free clinics.

**Table 1.**  
**Dental Component Statistics of North Carolina Free Clinics\***

2004 Dollar Equivalent for Dental Services		Percentage of Total Free Clinic Visits for Dental Care	
\$1,409,252		3.6%	
Dental Employees, Volunteers, and Hours of Service			
Number of Paid Dental Employees	Paid Dental Employee Hours	Number of Dental Volunteers	Dental Volunteer Hours
12	36,663	509	17,657
Type Dental Services Provided			
Preventive	Restorative	Emergency	Rehabilitative
31 clinics	32 clinics	38 clinics	25 clinics***

\* 58 clinics participated in this survey      Source: North Carolina Association of Free Clinics

includes reports of patients traveling long distances in order to find a provider who will accept Medicaid reimbursement. Given the inadequacy of the existing dental care delivery system, the value and necessity of safety net programs becomes clearly evident.

According to the Oral Health Section of the North Carolina Division of Health and Human Services, currently within North Carolina, there are more than 75 dental clinics dedicated

## Program Hurdles for Free Clinics: Funding and Personnel

Focusing on the free dental clinics, there are two main hurdles with which these programs must deal in order to be successful. As would be expected, these are funding and personnel. In addressing funding issues, it should be realized that there are many available sources for viable dental nonprofits, including,

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but not limited to, governmental organizations/grants, charitable trusts, local organizations, and private donations. Additionally, there are dental supply dealers and other organizations with programs providing free or low-cost supplies to qualified free dental clinics. The problem in funding often resides not in the lack of available resources, but in the lack of awareness of these resources by volunteers or paid personnel who are inexperienced in searching them out, inexperienced in grant writing, or lack an understanding of the various funding or resource entities' requirements. Table 2 provides examples of some sources of

funding, in-kind donations, or other support. Each source has its own restrictions, but the long-term success and sustainability of the dental programs will depend to a large part on their ability to seek out these resources, match their needs to the needs and desires of the sources, and on their ability to keep expenses to a minimum while still providing necessary services for their targeted population.

The second main hurdle is that of personnel. The recruitment, retaining, and scheduling of volunteer workers is crucial to the viability of any nonprofit organization, free dental clinics being no exception. Whether or not there are paid personnel within the organization, this aspect of the program certainly requires constant oversight and effort. Additionally, as these clinics are a part of the healthcare field in which licensure, liability, competence, confidentiality, political, worker safety, and other complicated issues abound, the task of recruiting and maintaining an adequate workforce is even more challenging. Without strict strategies and policies in place with which to handle these issues, the chance of long-term success of a free clinic decreases dramatically.

## Summary

Due to the shortcomings of the existing healthcare delivery system in general, and the dental field in particular, safety net programs are not simply optional; they are mandatory to help meet the overwhelming healthcare needs of the underserved. Free dental clinics are a vital part of this system, and indeed, millions of actual dollars,

**Table 2.**  
**Examples of Available Resources for Free Dental Care Programs**

Source	Type of Resource
<b>Charitable Foundations</b>	
Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust	Grant/Monetary
The Duke Endowment	Grant/Monetary
Canon Foundation	Grant/Monetary
<b>Governmental</b>	
NC Office of Rural Health	
Department of Health and Human Services	Monetary
<b>Private</b>	
NC Dental Society	Monetary
NC Association of Free Clinics	Monetary (available to members only)
Henry Schein Cares	Supplies
World Dental Relief	Supplies (reduced cost)
3M ESPE Dental Products	Supplies
<b>Local</b>	
Civic Organizations	Monetary/other
Local Foundations	Monetary
Local Benefactors	Monetary
Local Businesses	Monetary/in-kind/other
Local Hospitals	Monetary/in-kind
Local Dental Societies	Monetary/in-kind/other
Churches	Monetary/in-kind/other
Local Government	Monetary/in-kind/other

*“Given that most dental professionals have limited contact with the underserved, the free clinics offer the opportunity to bring in volunteer dentists, hygienists, and dental assistants who may then gain first-hand knowledge of the access crisis and work directly with North Carolina’s growing population in greatest need of dental care.”*

## The Open Door Dental Clinic of Alamance County

The Open Door Dental Clinic of Alamance County originated in October of 1998 operating one night per week in the newly opened Alamance County Health Department Dental Clinic facility. Although the focus of the health department clinic was to be on children, the Health Director and the Dental Advisory Committee desired to provide some dental services for the adult population as well. Thus, arose the idea of a free adult clinic to meet one or more nights per week. Dr. Steven Slott, a local dentist, and member of the Alamance County Board of Health, agreed to undertake the project, and the Open Door Dental Clinic was born.



*Portable dental care in action—hundreds receive dental care at Burlington Missions of Mercy, October 2005*

The clinic operated on Tuesday nights for extractions only. The list of volunteers included ten dentists from the local dental society, ten dental assistants, one dental hygienist, four front desk personnel, and dental assisting students from the Alamance Community College dental assisting program. Due to the overwhelming need, a second night of clinic was initiated for extractions only. In 2002, with funding from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, in cooperation with the Alamance Regional Medical Center, a third night was initiated for restorative needs. An integral part of the restorative night was the involvement of dental students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) School of Dentistry. Through a cooperative effort between UNC-Chapel Hill, the health department, and the Open Door Dental Clinic, dental students were allowed to provide clinical services to the patients in the clinic.

In 2004, planning for a new program operating under the Open Door Dental Clinic was undertaken. A portable dental program modeled after the Virginia Dental Association's Missions of Mercy program was the desired goal, which would help the underserved not only in Alamance County, but in many different dental care shortage areas of the state as well. This program includes utilization of portable dental chairs, units, lights, and all necessary peripheral equipment to set up large portable dental clinics in which volunteer providers would render free dental treatment to hundreds of financially qualified individuals during two- or three-day weekend events. Once again, through the generous support of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, in

cooperation with the Alamance Regional Medical Center, along with funding assistance from other local and state organizations, enough portable equipment was purchased to have a 30-chair portable clinic, complete with full sterilization, x-ray, all necessary instruments and supplies, and a large truck in which to store and transport the equipment. Utilizing this equipment, as many as six or seven free clinic weekend events will be held in different areas of the state each year.

During 2005, in addition to the fixed-site clinics in Burlington, five portable clinics have been held, in the west, east, and central areas of the state. In each clinic, 250-350 needy patients received dental treatment consisting of extractions, fillings, cleanings, and other services. Volunteers for each event included ten-20 dentists; ten-30 dental students; two to eight hygienists, dental assistants, and assisting students from community college programs; and scores of general volunteers. Tentative plans for 2006 include portable clinics in Murphy, Boone, Washington (NC), Burlington, and Wilmington. Treatment for 500 or more patients per weekend event will be the targeted goal for 2006, with increases each succeeding year. For 2005, it is estimated that the dollar value of donated dental services from the Open Door Dental Clinic of Alamance County will be in excess of \$350,000, with increases to be seen in each succeeding year. Patient visits for 2005 for both fixed-site and portable clinics will be estimated to be between 2,500 and 3,000. Estimated visits for 2006 will be 3,500-4,000.



*Needy patients waiting for treatment in Burlington, October 2005*

Funding for the Open Door clinic has come from many different sources. As previously stated, two grants have been received from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, the first in the amount of \$41,000 to fund the start up of the restorative night and, most recently, \$140,000 to fund the portable initiative. In addition, funds have been received from local Alamance County foundations, the Alamance-Caswell Dental Society, civic organizations, the Alamance Regional Medical Center, and other private donors. In-kind donations of dental equipment, facilities, and supplies have also been donated by the Alamance County Health Department, the Henry Schein Cares program, and from numerous dentists in the area.

millions of dollars worth of services and thousands of hours of professional manpower are donated each year to provide free dental services for the needy. The short-term benefits of these clinics are obvious, the rendering of dental care to tens of thousands of individuals per year who would otherwise go without. The long-term advantages may be somewhat less than obvious, however. Given that most dental professionals have limited contact with the underserved, the free clinics offer the opportunity to bring in volunteer dentists, hygienists, and dental assistants who may then gain first-hand knowledge of the access crisis and work directly with North Carolina's growing population in greatest need of dental care. Additionally, the free clinics often offer the same benefit for dental students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as well as for undergraduate pre-dental students. This is a key aspect, as for every one of these students who may eventually enter the dental profession with a willingness to provide for the underserved population, tens of thousands of individuals in need could potentially receive dental treatment over the span of a dental career.

The challenges of beginning and maintaining a free dental program over the long term are daunting. However, for those willing to invest the time and effort, the resources are available for long-term success with a resultant

significant, positive impact on the dental care access crisis now in existence. As stated by Dr. Franklin M. Boyar in describing his free dental program in Florida, "Project: Dentists Care is simply an organization that brings together unmet health needs of indigent populations within our communities with the desire of individual dentists to help their fellow man, along with the responsibility of a profession to deliver needed care to the underserved."<sup>5</sup> Inherent in consideration of itself as a profession is the understanding by the component members of dentistry that it is indeed a responsibility, not simply an option, to deliver needed dental care to all citizens, regardless of their ability to pay. At the heart of any successful resolution of the dental care access crisis is the ability of dental providers to accept this responsibility, significantly increase Medicaid acceptance, willingly participate in access initiatives, and provide the care for which they have been granted licensure by the citizens of North Carolina. **NCMedJ**

## For More Information:

To learn more about the Open Door Dental Clinic of Alamance County, visit their Web page.

[www.alamanceopendoordental.net](http://www.alamanceopendoordental.net)

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