

South Carolina Hospital Association

■ *best practice report*

lexington and richland counties' children and adult dental clinics: over 50 years of service to the community



Established in 1959 as a unit of the Crippled Children's Association, the purpose of the Children's Dental Clinic has always been to provide free dental services to low-income, school-age children in Richland and Lexington Counties. The Clinic was established by a partnership between the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) and the SC Family Service Center (SCFSC). The SC Family Service Center has been in existence for over 100 years and is devoted to serving the needs of families and helping people help themselves with passion, dedication and commitment. A successful partnership was defined by development of volunteer dental service providers to address oral health care needs of low-income children in Richland County.

The Clinic's first director worked with local providers to establish a network to provide services for those in need. The network included the development of a dental clinic and recruitment of volunteer dental professionals to provide care to children, free of cost, several days a week. Children eligible for the program cannot be on Medicaid or any other type of dental insurance program. Children who are enrolled in public schools and on free or reduced lunch can be certified to receive care; this serves as a good indicator of the family's income status. They are referred by school nurses and Family Service Center staff.

Due to the success of the program, an additional clinic was established in 1982 to serve children at the Lexington County DHEC site under the leadership of the program's new director, Diane Bouknight. The funding for the Clinic was provided by the United Way and in-kind space was provided by DHEC for both clinics. After the success of the Richland County clinic, Diane was able to demonstrate need in Lexington by tracking requests and referrals from patients and providers in the county. The case for an additional clinic was then presented to funders. Both clinics have the same requirements and perform an array of dental services such as cleanings, cavity restorations, extractions, and patient education. Diane, a former program dental assistant, accepted leadership of the program in 1979 and is still leading the charge to provide care for needy residents in Lexington and Richland

Counties. Diane credits the program's former director with instilling in her the importance of giving back to the community. The practical ingenuity, compassion and drive in helping others evident in Diane have been key factors to the program's success.

Always attune to areas of organizational growth, the Dental Clinic opened a volunteer hygiene program at the Richland location in 1994. Volunteer feedback and observation of patients' needs highlighted the gap between treatment and oral hygiene. The belief of volunteer staff was that if patients weren't being instructed in good hygiene, then the extensive treatment provided would not be maintained. Therefore, the development of a hygiene program helped patients and improved volunteer perception of the program's benefit by responding to their concerns.

Diane began the process of setting up the program by sending a letter to volunteer dentists and asking them to have hygienists contact her if they were interested in volunteering with the program. Recognition of limited funding resources led Ms. Bouknight to leverage her relationships with dental representatives that sold the Clinic supplies in order to have hygiene supplies donated. Still operational today, the volunteer hygienists provide free cleanings and fluoride treatments to children.

In 2005 a fluoride varnish clinic was added and is staffed by Midlands Technical College (MTC) hygiene students. The van provides services to pre-school age children in the WIC program at SCDHEC. Ms. Bouknight's former background was in teaching at MTC so she stayed in contact with instructors. Once a program for fluoride varnish was added to the school's curriculum, she realized that there was an opportunity to provide training for students and additional help for the Clinic.

According to a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, "in 2006, more than 100 million Americans were uninsured for oral health care for the full year – nearly three times the number who lacked health insurance." In recognition of this overwhelming need, Sisters of Charity funded expansion of services in 1998; the dental clinic for adults in Richland

County was established in 1999. An Adult Dental Clinic for Lexington County residents was established in 2007. In the development of the model, the Advisory Board of the Clinic interviewed key stakeholders and volunteer dentists in the area to help with the design. Stakeholders and volunteer dentists were excited and supportive about the concept but recommended separation between the children and adult Clinics based on their experiences with volunteer programs and the industry.

The model of the Adult Dental Clinic differs from the Children Dental Clinic. For instance, the Children's Dental Clinic is comprised solely of volunteer dentists and hygienists and consists of four dental assistants as employed staff. However, the adult Clinic has four part-time staffed dentists, two hygienists and two dental assistants. The Clinic is funded by Palmetto Health and the United Way and reports successes regularly by monitoring services provided and by linking work to outcomes. The program uses reporting as an opportunity to remind funders of the need for dental services in the community. When asked about the different designs of the program, Diane said the program has found the following consistencies over her 30 plus years tenure:

- Typically, dental professionals are more willing to volunteer time for children
- Employed staff for the adult program provide continuity for patients
- Staff have time to build a rapport and create a support system for each other

Collaborating for Change

The development of partnerships has been integral to the success of the program. Diane has been intentional about cultivating volunteers, examining resources and establishing innovative relationships. Examples of partnerships established over the years by the Clinic include:

- Since 1983, residents of Palmetto Health Richland's Department of Dental Education have rotated through the Clinic – this partnership has benefited the program by

providing additional capacity and students by offering practical education and training.

- A partnership with Health Reach (now Healthy Learners) to serve school-age children was established in 1993. This partnership allows Healthy Learners to provide transportation for children from the school to the Clinic. This helps children participating in Healthy Learners to have care for dental issues while helping to remove a large barrier for many parents of children eligible for the Clinic's services.
- The strategic collaboration in 1998 with Palmetto Health, Family Service Center and SCDHEC led to the opening of a Medicaid-eligible children's clinic to address needs of the community. The Medicaid-eligible Clinic was discontinued in 2000 with the rise of Medicaid clinics in the area, allowing for the Children's Dental Clinic to refocus efforts on its original mission of serving Lexington and Richland Counties' indigent population.
- A partnership with Palmetto Healthy Start began in 1998, focused on providing dental services for expectant mothers at a local hospital's OB Clinic. Collaboration included the Clinic's support in research related to the study of the relationship between premature, low birth weight babies and periodontal disease.
- As highlighted earlier, Midlands Technical College partnered with the Clinic in 2005 to provide in-the-field training to hygienists at the Clinic and for the expansion of services to children younger than the typical population.
- In 2007, establishment as a United Way-funded agency allowed for the development of the Adult Dental Clinic at the Lexington location. An agency funded by the United Way of the Midlands means that the organization demonstrates measurable, sustainable outcomes and success.

Volunteers as the "heart of a program"

Diane is quoted in the Family Service Center's November 2010 Newsletter as stating "The most rewarding thing for me is being able to work in a profession with those so willing to give back to their community." As a testament to Diane and the Dental Clinic's dedication and support of its volunteers, many providers have offered their specialty at the Clinic for over 25 years. When being interviewed, Diane shows pictures and warmly tells stories of the 14 second-generation and husband/wife teams of volunteers that dedicate their time, efforts and resources to the Clinic.

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As the Director of the Clinic, Diane serves as a visionary leader, director of development, recruiter, scheduler and an array of other activities to support the Clinic's needs. She speaks fondly of her over 30 years of support and comments that she was "motivated" to work there because of the mission. In the recruitment of volunteers, Diane translates this same passion and enthusiasm for the work. Therefore, the majority of the Clinic's volunteers are recruited by word-of-mouth. However, the Clinic also advertises in the newspaper, attends various meetings and functions to stay connected with the dental community and devotes time to visiting new dentists that arrive in the area.

The Adult and Children's Dental Clinic of Richland and Lexington Counties is a 50 plus year program that demonstrates the importance of a strong model; a willingness to innovate, collaborate and partner; and the development and support of a strong infrastructure of volunteers.

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