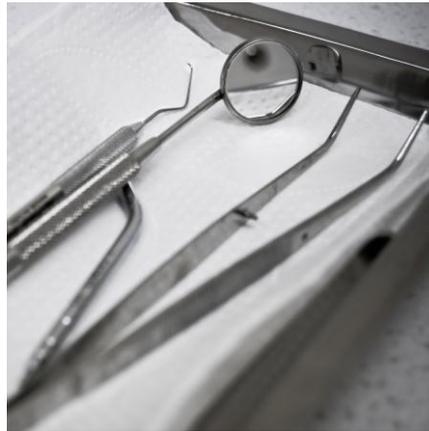


South Carolina Hospital Association

■ *best practice report*

*Greenville Free Medical Clinic and Our Lady of Mercy
Dental Programs*



Access to dental care is an important part of health that many Americans do not have. According to the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), more than 49 million individuals live in areas designated as “dental shortage areas” and 65% of those individuals are classified as “underserved.” Two South Carolina programs have been working diligently to meet the needs of the underserved in their respective communities for more than a decade. The Greenville Free Medical Clinics’ (GFMC) dental program was established in 1994 while the Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services program, located in Charleston County, began shortly after in 1999. How these programs were established, what have they done to continue to support vulnerable, underserved individuals and what other communities can learn will be detailed in this report. AccessHealth SC interviewed each programs’ leadership, staff and volunteers to better understand their success.

Greenville Free Medical Clinic

The robust volunteer dental program existing today began as a collaborative brainchild of GFMC leadership and a local dentist, Dr. Joseph Outten. The successes of the GFMC’s volunteer physician program led Dr. Outten to reach out to the GFMC’s leadership for developing a similar model for volunteer dentists. In the 1990s, many private practices in Greenville’s dental community were already caring for indigent dental patients. Dr. Outten served as a strong champion by meeting with local dentists and personally working to recruit them as volunteers for the program. A key point to the large dental community was the opportunity to “share the load.” The perception was that some dentists were overwhelmed by patients in need while others were not. Therefore, the clinic served a dual purpose in the community: it filled the need of dentists who had a desire for volunteer work and served as an equalizer, for local dentists, in treating needy residents. The program began as an extraction clinic using donated equipment one evening a week for approximately three hours. As the volunteer program continued to grow, the capacity of the clinic expanded and dentists began to donate equipment.

There was recognition of the need for expansion so GFMC leadership and dental champions orchestrated a community capital campaign aimed at providing a new facility. Before beginning the campaign, the leadership of GFMC hired a fundraising consultant to perform a feasibility study. The study helped leadership to identify potential resources. As identified in the feasibility study, leadership was able to reach out to a variety of community stakeholders such as local hospitals, philanthropic organizations and other community connections who supported the campaign. Through the campaign, the clinic raised over 1 million dollars in 1998 to build a new facility that doubled the space of the GFMC and purchased additional equipment. Since the initial clinic expansion, the clinic has continued to strengthen community partnerships and services offered to patients. The GFMC's growth and sophistication of dental care has mirrored industry changes by expanding beyond acute treatment to include early interventions and even preventative oral care. GFMC offers fillings, cleanings, extractions and dental education to patients. Dr. Dana Parker, the part-time dentist and champion of the program, describes the GFMC program as services aimed at providing help to "real people with real issues, real pain and real needs. Our goal is not to simply get rid of an abscess but to understand that the mouth is a part of the whole body."

Over the years, leadership of GFMC has experienced firsthand the importance of dedicated staff for the clinic. GFMC employs a full-time dental assistant and a partnership with Bon Secours St. Francis Health System provides the part-time dentist. GFMC has four Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) students four and a half days a week to provide patient services and the St. Francis mobile dental unit for restorative services comes to the clinic one day a week.

The program model is largely volunteer-based and the value of volunteer service in 2011 was approximately \$750,000. More than 80 dentists rotate through the program and volunteer essentially a shift per quarter. Many of the dentists who volunteer with the program have been actively engaged since the program's beginning. However, the GFMC has been fortunate to have multigenerational volunteerism. Largely, MUSC dental students who open practices in the upstate have continued to come back to volunteer with GFMC.

GFMC Partnerships

It is through the ideology of serving the “whole person” that the GFMC has been able to leverage relationships with local hospitals, Bon Secours St. Francis Health System and Greenville Hospital System; the Medical University of South Carolina; and Greenville Technical College.

The partnerships with the local hospitals are largely referral. Bon Secours St. Francis Healthcare and Greenville Hospital System both refer patients to the GFMC and have been a part of community planning and discussion on addressing dental access. St. Francis also employs the part-time dentist at GFMC, Dr. Parker, for 25 hours a week. Dr. Parker sees dental patients at the St. Francis emergency department and helps to facilitate the strong referral relationship. St. Francis’ mobile dental unit also helps to increase clinic capacity by being at the satellite clinic in Greer one day a week.

The MUSC partnership has greatly benefited both parties involved. The school is located more than three hours away from the clinic, so leveraging the partnership took a lot of planning and forethought. In 2009, leadership of the SC Dental Association championed the partnership with MUSC to have a rotation of students in the upstate. The partnership began as two evenings a week but has now expanded to more than four days a week to include both extractions and restorative treatment. MUSC funds the participation of their students to rotate through the clinic by covering the students’ travel and accommodation. The GFMC only covers the cost of supplies and is not required to pay the students or school. Dr. Parker is considered Adjunct Faculty of MUSC and serves as a supervisor to the students and program. Other GFMC volunteer dentists are also “faculty” to ensure students have appropriate guidance and supervision at the GFMC. The partnership affords GFMC the opportunity to enrich the education of dental students by exposing them to different populations and a variety of treatments.

Our Lady of Mercy Dental Clinic

The Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services, Inc., known locally as the "Outreach," was established in 1989 as a non-profit organization to address the needs of disadvantaged, vulnerable residents of James, John and Wadmalaw Islands in Charleston County, SC. The Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy established the agency and still serves as its sponsor today. The Outreach's operating budget is largely supported through charitable donations but a sustaining donation of almost \$3 million from the Sisters covers the administrative expenses of the organization.

In 1999, after receiving a seed grant from The Duke Endowment to initiate a wellness program, the Outreach staff engaged potential patients and the entire community. Focus groups and door-to-door interviews were used to assess the needs of the area. Through this process, it was recognized that the most immediate health need of residents was for programs that focused on the "whole person," not just treating the patient but also providing health education and connections to local resources. Dental and prenatal care were recognized as the largest needs of island residents.

As a result of that survey, in 1999 The Outreach's Wellness Center began direct services in a double-wide trailer, providing women's health services and dental care to the economically poor of the sea island area. Response to the two programs was immediate and positive, and very soon the small facility was filled with pregnant women and adults in urgent need of dental care. Service statistics increased each year until 2005, when the Board of the Outreach announced a \$3.5 million capital campaign intended to build and fund a new and larger Wellness Center. The campaign was very successful, raising over \$4.7 million, including grants from the Kresge and Spaulding-Paolozzi Foundations and again from The Duke Endowment. The foundations were attracted to the project because of the rapid growth in services provided, and the significant financial support committed by local donors.

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The Wellness Center is the only provider of the combination of free women's health and prenatal care, comprehensive dental care and health education within a 15-mile radius of its Johns Island location. The dental program began small with the guidance and leadership of a dental champion, Dr. John Howard. In the early days, the clinic was limited to one night a week, but from the beginning Dr. Howard was committed to providing comprehensive dental care, unusual for a free dental clinic. Most free clinics provide "pain relief," i.e., extractions, but Our Lady of Mercy's Dental Clinic provides an array of other treatments, including fillings, root canals and even crowns. Treatments that can't be provided by staff or volunteers are referred to specialists, many of whom also donate their services.

That service philosophy had an obvious appeal to potential patients, but it appealed to dental professionals as well. Local dentists heard about the need for volunteers at the clinic through direct contacts from Dr. Howard and by word-of-mouth from their peers. Today, the dental clinic benefits from the volunteer services of 31 licensed dentists. Dr. Howard has moved to a full-time director of dentistry position, and with the assistance of his retinue of volunteers, provided approximately \$1 million worth of dental services to the community in fiscal year 2011-2012.

Outreach Partnerships

From the day the Wellness Center opened in the double-wide trailer, Outreach staff worked hard to establish creative partnerships in the community. Their success in developing those partnerships largely accounts for the Outreach's ability to provide services to so many.

The only dental school in South Carolina is in the same county as the Outreach, therefore an obvious opportunity was to reach out to the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC). The school has responded enthusiastically, and the partnership has strengthened over time. Currently, the MUSC College of Dental Medicine has designated a majority of the Outreach's volunteer dentists "adjunct faculty," a credential which allows them to supervise dental students. A similar

arrangement for dental assistants and dental hygienists in training exists with Trident Technical College. Each school term between 8-12 dental assistant students and approximately 20 dental hygiene students rotate through the Outreach's dental clinic. Dr. John Howard stresses that these relationships mean that a high percentage of dental professionals trained in the state leave school with personal experience at the Outreach's clinic—a valuable, hands-on experience previously unavailable. Some have returned after graduation as volunteers. With these partnerships, during the past three years the Wellness Center's dental clinic has doubled the number of patients it serves.

Another partnership must also be acknowledged—every year over 750 local residents contribute financially in support of the Outreach's services. Such wide-spread support compensates for the fact that the clinic receives no government funding or federated support.

Lessons Learned: Greenville Free Medical Clinic and Our Lady of Mercy

Both dental programs have been successful and have grown since they've been in operation. GFMC has practically doubled capacity in two years with approximately 4,200 patients in 2011 through the expansion of partnerships and program adjustments, and the Outreach has grown from 365 patients in its first year to almost 4,000 in 2011. How have they done it?

When asked about their lessons learned, both programs cited the need for full-time staff. Although largely volunteer, some full-time staff for dental programs provide consistency and continuity for volunteers and patients. At Our Lady of Mercy, the market value of those volunteer dental services is approximately \$600,000 per year. The leadership of both programs spoke extensively about partnerships. Although highly successful on their own, both recognized the need to actively recruit and develop partnerships with organizations inside and outside of the community. Partnerships did not happen haphazardly, but in many cases, those relationships had to be actively established and each program had to demonstrate outcomes that would fit with their partners' desired goals and needs.

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GFMC and OLM have strong support from dental champions. In both cases, it was the passion and drive of the dental champions, in partnership with program leadership, that helped establish the foundation for the programs and garner support for their continued success. Each program regularly examined strengths, weaknesses and needs. Once opportunities for improvement and funding needs were identified, they were widely communicated and shared. Through transparency and active engagement with the community, each program had the benefit of having stakeholders respond to their needs and advocate on their behalf.

Future plans include the need to continue to be “responsive and nimble and grow on behalf of the patients we serve,” says Suzie Foley at GFMC. Both programs recognize that opportunities for growth and improvement always exist, so they will continue to strengthen community partnerships and their programs to react to the need.

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