

Marin Community Clinics stretches to meet rising need for dental care

By Richard Halstead

rhalstead@marinij.com @HalsteadRichard on Twitter

POSTED: 01/01/2015 04:50:59 PM PST



Vanessa Zavala, a dental assistant at Marin Community Clinics, works on 6-year-old Canal resident Darwin Rodas Diaz, a patient in the dental clinic, as dad Rodolfo Rodas looks on. (Frankie Frost — Marin Independent Journal)



Darwin Rodas Diaz, 6, smiles after getting his... (Frankie Frost — Marin Independent Journal)

On a recent winter day, Rodolfo Rodas took his son Darwin Rodas Diaz, 6, to the Marin Community Clinics to have his teeth cleaned; it's an easy walk from their home in San Rafael's Canal neighborhood.

Thanks to the work of the clinics, Marin is doing a better job providing dental care for low-income children like Darwin than many California counties, officials say.

In addition to providing health care to low income Marin residents, the San Rafael nonprofit supplied dental care to 11,000 patients this year, about 9,000 of whom were children. There were approximately 40,000 patient visits to Marin Community Clinics' dental offices in 2014.



Darwin Rodas Diaz, 6, gets his teeth cleaned by Vanessa Zavala in the dental clinic at Marin Community Clinics in San Rafael. The clinic is excelling compared with other California counties in providing dental services to the poor. (Frankie Frost — Marin Independent Journal)

"We're running 19 dental chairs, seven days a week. We can't seem to work fast enough or for long enough hours," said Linda Tavasi, executive director of Marin Community Clinics.

NEW FINDINGS

The California State Auditor released a report last month stating that nearly 56 percent of the 5.1 million children enrolled in Medi-Cal from Oct. 1, 2012 to Sept. 30, 2013, failed to receive dental care through the program.

The auditor said that in 2013 11 counties had no dental provider willing to accept new Medi-Cal patients and that 16 counties had provider-to-beneficiary ratios above one dentist for every 2,000 patients. The report said that one of the main reasons for the low dental provider participation is low reimbursement rates. California last raised its dental reimbursement rates in fiscal year 2000-2001, and in September 2013 the state cut reimbursement rates by 10 percent for most providers.

Tavasi said that hasn't been a problem for Marin Community Clinics, even though it gets about 76 percent of its funding from Medi-Cal. That is because Marin is a federally qualified health center, Tavasi said. As a result, Marin Community Clinics is reimbursed per visit rather than per service, the way that private dentists are. The result is much larger reimbursements.

USING MEDI-CAL

According to the auditor's report, in 2013 Marin was the county with the second highest Medi-Cal utilization rate for children's dental care in the state. About fifty-two percent of Marin children covered by Medi-Cal had at least one dental procedure performed during the year through the Medi-Cal dental program.

"A huge clinic in the East Bay, La Clínica de La Raza, has far fewer chairs than we do and way more population in Contra Costa, Alameda and Solano counties that they serve," Tavasi said. Marin Community Clinics coordinates medical and dental appointments to make visits more convenient for parents, she said.



Alma Macias preps a room for a procedure at the dental clinic of Marin Community Clinics in San Rafael. (Frankie Frost — Marin Independent Journal)

Jenny Kattlove, director of strategic health initiatives for the Children's Partnership, which lobbied the state to do its audit, said, "The providers in Marin County should be commended for doing a great job of meeting the needs of the county's most underserved children." But noting that 48 percent of Marin children covered by Medi-Cal did not see a dentist in 2013, she added, "I suspect the state could do more to identify where the gaps in care are and identify solutions."

DEMAND GROWING

The audit also estimated that the number of individuals using dental services through Medi-Cal could soon increase from 2.7 million to as many as 6.4 million. It said the increase is likely due to

the restoration of dental services to adults and the expansion of Medi-Cal's eligibility income limits as a result of the Affordable Care Act.

There are 16 paid dentists on Marin Community Clinics' staff and one volunteer: Dr. John Boland of San Rafael, a pediatric dentist, who also serves on the board.

"He sees the toughest patients, the ones that cling to the ceiling," said Dr. Connie Kadera, the clinics' chief dental officer.

Boland recalls that before Marin Community Clinics opened its doors with six dental chairs in 2008, there were only two dental chairs in all of Marin County to treat low income residents. Marin Community Clinics now has nine chairs at its main office on Kerner Boulevard, six in Novato and four on Fourth Street in San Rafael.

"We're still struggling with the demand," Boland said.

CARING FOR KIDS

Boland said the dental program has always focused on children because a disease known as "early childhood caries" is endemic in the Canal community, where 80 percent of Marin Community Clinics' patients live. Early childhood caries, also known as baby bottle tooth decay, is a common bacterial infection that causes tooth decay in infants and young children. The disease can result from unrestricted bottle feeding and consumption of liquids containing fermentable carbohydrates, such as juice, milk, and soft drinks. Children can be infected by parents with poor oral hygiene.

Due to the state's economic woes, state legislators eliminated Medi-Cal coverage for all adult non-emergency dental care in 2009 and didn't reinstate it until June 2013. Boland said MCC's dental program continued to treat adult patients, however, charging them on a sliding scale.

"Usually, it was about a \$50 charge," Boland said, "and if they didn't have it, we billed them. We collected on some of that and a lot of it we didn't."

NEED AMONG ADULTS

Kadera said an unmet need for adult dental services in the county remains, and Marin Community Clinics is attempting to fill it. Currently, adults can schedule appointments from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Mondays; Sundays are reserved for pregnant women, who can't come to the clinics the rest of the week due to the use of nitrous oxide on those days.

This month Marin Community Clinics will begin expanded hours for adults to include Saturdays in Novato and two nights a week, 5 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. in San Rafael.