Mobile clinic provides free dental care for low-income children in Contra Costa County

By Eve Mitchell
Contra Costa Times

PITTSBURG -- Ana Negrete greeted her 7-year-old son with a big smile after he got out of the dentist's chair at a mobile dental clinic.

"His molar won't hurt anymore," Negrete, a Concord resident, said through a Spanish-speaking interpreter after dentist Alida Araica treated Bryan Campos for the severe decay in his baby teeth.

Unlike his mother, Bryan was not smiling, which is not all that surprising after sitting still in the dentist's chair for awhile. Bryan, who was cooperative, also happened to turn 7 years old on the day of his appointment.

Araica works for La Clinica de La Raza, a local nonprofit clinic that is part of public-private partnership using the mobile clinic to provide free dental care to low-income children through age 19 in Contra Costa County. The clinic also visits elementary schools, primarily in the Pittsburg Unified School District, where a majority of the students are low-income.

"The mission is to take the service to where there is the greatest need so we go to low-income schools. That's our target," said Chris Grazzini, program manager for John Muir Community Health Alliance, which provides a driver, program management and coordination for the clinic. One day last week, the mobile clinic was parked in the lot of the Pittsburg Health Center, where Araica saw children from throughout Contra Costa County in need of dental care.

"I would say 99 percent of our patients don't have insurance and don't have the means to go to private dentist," said Araica before attending to another patient, 6-year-old Katia Chavez of Brentwood, who was getting fluoridation treatment after having her teeth cleaned.

Without the clinic, it would be very difficult to find dental care for her children, said Katia's mother, Maricela Chavez, who spoke through a Spanish-speaking interpreter. "I have no insurance," she said.

The mobile clinic is viewed as a stopgap measure to provide dental care to low-income children, which is why the average patient only has about two visits.

One of the program goals is to try and enroll children into the Medi-Cal insurance program to cover their medical bills and help them establish a long-term relationship with a dentist, Grazzini said.

Still, it's not easy to get parents to enroll their children, said Grazzini, adding that an estimated 86 percent of children who have gone to the clinic over the years remained uninsured.

"The child may be eligible, but the parents don't always follow through because of fear of immigration issues," she said. "They don't fill out the paperwork; that's the biggest issue we run into."

The mobile dental clinic was launched in 2004 and is a program of the Dental Collaborative of Contra Costa. The clinic operates at various locations two days a week in West County and two days in East County. While many children are referred to the clinic, parents can also request appointments for their children by calling La Clinica de La Raza at 925-431-7103.

In addition to John Muir Community Health Alliance and La Clinica de La Raza, other partners include Lifelong/Brookside Community Health Clinic and the Contra Costa Health Services/Children's Oral Health Program, which provides dental education at 23 elementary schools in the Antioch, Pittsburg and West Contra Costa school districts.
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Mobile clinic operations are funded by foundation grants that have come from Ronald McDonald House Charities and Wells Fargo, among others. The van is provided by Ronald McDonald House Charities.

From 2004 through the end of 2011, the mobile clinic has provided dental services for 4,329 children served in 8,483 visits. In addition, the Children's Oral Health Program has provided dental education to 31,865 children and oral health assessments for 28,182 children. Some of these children are referred to the mobile dental clinic, said Nikki Moultrie, program manager of the Children's Oral Health Program.

"The ones we refer are the ones that don't have a dental home, somewhere where a child has established a relationship with a dentist," she said. "These are kids that don't have access to regular care; they are either uninsured or underinsured."

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