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## What we learn from 'Give Kids a Smile'

For the eighth straight year, the Minnesota Dental Association coordinated the efforts of the dental community to provide free dental care to low-income children throughout the state with its "Give Kids a Smile" program. With more than 200 offices, 2,500 dental professionals and many community partners, an unprecedented 7,000-plus children received free care on Feb. 5 and 6. It is easy to look at statistics to show the success of a well-planned charitable program, but bringing it to a personal level is where the impact on our hearts is greatest.

We are one of numerous offices that have participated since the program's inception, with 23 of our current and former staff volunteering their time working with 33 children this year. Each year we provide comprehensive services such as examinations, cleanings, oral hygiene instruction, fluoride treatment, sealants, fillings and extractions, and we've been able to complete all the care the children needed on the day they came to our office. What we observe is that dental need for kids is not going away.

Unmet dental need is accentuated by these more difficult economic times.

In each family situation, without Give Kids a Smile, parents have said, they could not afford to take their children for treatment. We are often the only dentist the child has seen due to whatever access barrier they have. Families came to us from as close as two miles to as far as 340 miles away. They are from single-parent families, dual-parent families and extended families with grandparents as participating caregivers. We see native Minnesotans and immigrants with correspondingly diverse backgrounds. There is an overwhelming theme from the parents, and that is a desire to take care of their children but the inability to afford dental care. Their stories bear a recurrent theme, yet are individual and personal.

One family, in particular, left a lasting impression on us. This family had suffered staggering medical and financial difficulties. One parent recently succumbed to a long-term illness. The family's home was sold, and they were still having difficulty paying for basic needs. Obtaining dental care had become a low priority. Through a connection in their church and the Give Kids a Smile program, the children were able to get needed dental treatment.

As a dentist, parent and community member, I worry about the children whose parents have to make the difficult choice to omit dental



care in order to pay for more urgent basic necessities. Children with toothaches are not able to concentrate and learn in school. There are school days missed due to dental pain, not to mention the unhealthy and potentially life-threatening

infections that can arise. Dental health also plays such an important part in a child's self-esteem.

Some of the positive effects have been related to dentistry's focus on education and preventive care. There are several children who return to our office each year. With the help of their parents, these children are taking care of themselves and return needing only preventive services. One of the benefits of this has been an ability to increase our capacity to treat even more children over time. An even greater benefit is that we are instilling the value of optimal dental health, which will pay rewards for these children into the future.

As there are countless stories of heart-breaking personal and family situations limiting access to good dental health, there are just as many stories of unheralded care given out of compassion by the dental community. Dentists will always do their part to help children, through Give Kids a Smile and other charitable efforts. And we know we aren't alone. Many other health care professionals also struggle with the effects of under-funded public programs.

Thank you to the 2,500 dental professionals who joined Give Kids a Smile again this year to serve children. Together, we can place a significant dent in the unmet dental needs of Minnesota children. But, alone, charity care is not the solution for these families.

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