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Dental office serves people on Medicaid or with no insurance

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Ron Tomlinson wasn't going to lie: He was not overjoyed to be at the dentist's office on a recent morning. "I don't come to the dentist unless it's absolutely necessary," he said.

But he's glad that when it is necessary, he can go to a newly expanded office at Primary Health Care, which specializes in treating people like him, who have no dental insurance, and those who are on Medicaid.

Tomlinson, 38, needed a filling replaced, so he went to the south-side Des Moines clinic, where he knew he could find affordable help. He was pleased to see the shiny new waiting room and the new treatment areas. He pointed to the original part of Primary Health Care's facility, where the dental clinic used to be housed. "This is a lot better than that little room they had over there. It was like a closet," he said.

Agency leaders say their expansion should help meet a huge need. Tens of thousands of central Iowans either have no dental insurance or are covered by Medicaid, the government insurance program for the poor. They often have trouble finding care from private dentists, most of whom limit the number of Medicaid patients they see because they say the program pays too little.

The brick addition covers 3,600 square feet, with nine treatment rooms. That compares with the old clinic's 900 square feet with three treatment rooms. Federal grants covered more than half of the \$800,000 cost. Federal programs also help Primary Health Care hire and retain staff.

At times, the old clinic was down to one dentist. The new facility will allow up to three dentists and a hygienist to work at the same time. The program also hopes to bring in dental students.

The clinic draws dentists because it helps them qualify for a federal program that helps repay their college loans.

Dr. Adrienne Jennings, who started working for Primary Health Care in February, said the loan-repayment program helped attract her. But she said it's rewarding to work with patients who have few alternatives. She said patients often are unfairly stigmatized if they're uninsured or on Medicaid, also known as Title 19. "They're people just like everybody else. Quite honestly, any of us could wind up on Title 19," she said. "They all deserve to be treated fairly."

Jennings treats about 15 people per day, and she said most of them are willing to follow instructions to keep their teeth healthy. "The patients are so grateful," she said. "They're really wonderful."

Executive Director Kelly Huntsman said the old setup hampered efficiency. "Until now, because of our lack of space, we've basically been limiting our care to emergencies," she said.

Primary Health Care is one of three Des Moines agencies that see large numbers of dental patients who are

Expanded clinic in Des Moines

WHAT: Primary Health Care's bigger dental clinic

WHERE: 2353 S.E. 14th St. in Des Moines. (515) 248-1470.

The agency also provides dental services at its Marshalltown office, 412 E. Church St. (641) 844-6230.

Other area options for Medicaid recipients
Two other Des Moines agencies provide dental services to people with no insurance or with Medicaid:

DES MOINES HEALTH CENTER is at 1111 Ninth St. Call (515) 244-9136.

BROADLAWNS MEDICAL CENTER, Polk County's public hospital, is at 1801 Hickman Road. The dental clinic number is (515) 282-2421.

uninsured or have Medicaid. The other two are Broadlawns Medical Center and the Des Moines Health Center. Together, they see about 13,000 dental patients per year, Huntsman said. The new facility should allow Primary Health Care to add about 2,800 patients, she said, which would more than double the number it was seeing before. "We are hopeful that we can make a little bit of a dent."

For uninsured people, the program offers a sliding fee scale. People making less than the federal poverty rate, which is about \$10,500 annually for a single person, pay \$25 per visit. Others pay more, depending on their income. "We're not looking for a profit margin," Huntsman said. "We just want to cover our costs."

Huntsman said the clinic never sends collection agents after patients. Tomlinson, the uninsured patient, said he appreciates the clinic's stance. "I may pay \$5 or \$10 a week, but I get it paid," he said. "They always work with me."

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