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Smile! Free dental work shows up at schools

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It wasn't a typical first-period class, but it sure was educational.

On a recent snowy morning, Zack Benevento sat inside a big, white van parked near Des Moines Hoyt Middle School. The 32-foot vehicle, decorated with a grinning cartoon tooth, was a new, rolling dental clinic, and the eighth-grader was one of its first patients.

He looked up at a wall-mounted computer screen that showed X-ray images of his teeth. Dental assistant Natalie Green pointed to the electronic pictures, which had been shot a few minutes earlier. She showed him where two adult teeth were growing out, pushing the baby teeth on top. The old ones needed to come out, she said, or they would provide hiding places for damaging bacteria.

"You going to wiggle those baby teeth out on your own, Zack?" Green said.

Zack said, "Yeah."

Green said, "Like, this weekend?"

He laughed. "Yeah, sure," he said, with more conviction.

Welcome to the second Smile Squad Mobile Dental Clinic, run by the Des Moines Health Center. The van, which looks like a recreational vehicle from the outside, holds two small examining rooms and a lab. It has everything from tilting chairs to swivel lights to power drills, suction tubes and water jets.

The \$245,000 van was purchased with a donation from Professional Solutions, a Clive insurance and investment company whose clients include many dentists. Jonathan Roth, the company's chief marketing officer, said the idea was to help children whose parents have no dental insurance or who struggle to make appointments because of hectic work schedules.

"Kids, unfortunately, don't always have access to a dentist, and this is a good way for them to at least get in to see one," Roth said.

The Des Moines Health Center, which runs the program, is a United Way-supported agency that focuses on dental care. It has a large clinic north of downtown Des Moines, and it started a mobile clinic service several years ago to reach children at schools.

In recent years, the service has reached about 30 schools in Polk and Dallas counties, and administrators hope to expand that with the addition of a second mobile clinic. The program focuses on schools in relatively low-income areas, where students tend to have no dental insurance or Medicaid, a government insurance plan that many dentists decline to accept.

On this day, the van was staffed by two dental assistants who work for the clinic, a dental-assistant student and volunteer dentist Adam Fuller. Fuller, who has an east-side Des Moines office, provides his services via the mobile clinic about five times a year.

Prospective patients are identified beforehand by dental assistants who do quick screenings to see if

students might need full exams.

"Sometimes, the students tell us they haven't been to the dentist ever, or in two or five years," Green said.

On a typical day, about 30 will be seen in the van.

This day's mix included teen-agers from the middle school and younger students from Brubaker Elementary next door. Some just needed a cleaning. Others needed fillings.

A few needed more extensive work, for which they would be referred to the clinic or a private dentist.

Green, the dental assistant, watched Fuller drill out and fill two cavities in a teen who had no insurance. "That's \$600 worth of dentistry right there," she said. "How are parents supposed to budget for that?"

She sensed that the procedure was almost done. "How much time would you like, Doctor, before I bring you a second-grader?" she said.

Fuller peered into the teen's mouth. "Oh, give me 15 or 20 minutes," he said.

When it was over, the teen got up, held a tentative hand to his jaw and stepped out of the van.

Green watched him walk toward the school. "A little Novocain, a little filling, and back to P.E.," she said, jokingly.

When Zack Benevento was done with his exam, Green told him he'd need to return the next day for cleaning.

"What do you have for first period tomorrow, Zack?" she asked.

"Current Events," he said.

"Current Events? Would you rather come back to the dentist?"

He thought about that for a second. "Yeah, sure," he said.

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