

# Dental help often hard to find

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They arrive from across southeast New Mexico, often in wracking pain with swollen jaws and aching teeth.

And every morning beginning at 7 a.m., Dr. Richard Lewis finds these people in the waiting room at Community Dental packed wall to wall awaiting treatment, many of them having spent two, and often three, hours on the road to get here.

Unfortunately, many of them will find they have made the trip in vain.

Community Dental, a statewide organization with a state contract to provide dental care to the poor, ran out of money to treat their state patients March 1, a problem the organization attributes to bureaucratic indifference and incremental cuts to their budget since the clinic's founding.

When the Hobbs clinic opened in 1993 it

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had a budget of \$216,000; their budget for 2000 was \$90,000.

Community Dental has five clinics, four in Albuquerque and one in Hobbs. The Hobbs clinic, at 313 W. Scharbauer, represented their first effort outside the Albuquerque area and treats more than a 1,000 people each year.

While other organizations provide similar services, for many people the clinic is their only source for dental care in southeast New Mexico.

The funding shortfall doesn't threaten Medicaid patients, but it does mean that many state-funded patients must go without care, or pay for services unexpectedly.

One of those patients in Lewis' waiting

room recently was Charity Crocker, a retiree from Eunice who depends on what she gets from Social Security each month to make ends meet.

On a recent trip to Community Dental earlier this month, Crocker discovered she would have to pay more than \$200 for treatment. She paid part of the bill, saying that when she also has to spend nearly \$200 per month for prescription medication the unexpected expense seemed a bit unfair.

"I'm not upset," Crocker said about the unexpected cost. "I just don't have the money to have them pulled."

Lewis said his clinic has begun turning away patients, or asking patients to pay for services they hadn't anticipated having to pay for. He added that his clinic will continue seeing those in pain at Community

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Dental's expense.

"They drive a long way ... they will hop in their car and drive for two or three hours to get over here; then find out they can't have it ... and of course they're very unhappy," Lewis said. "You certainly can't blame them."

Lewis said that since his clinic ran out of money March 1 he has visited with local government leaders and legislators, and appeared at the Hobbs City Commission's April 16 meeting to ask them to support his clinic's request for additional funding to finish the fiscal year and to get their budget restored.

After Lewis' appearance before the Hobbs City Commission, the commission agreed to draft a letter to state Secretary of Health Alex Valdez. Mayor Robert Wallach drafted the letter by April 18.

"We're disappointed that we lost that dental clinic money," Wallach said, indicating that the clinic was important for poor families and children. He also said he hoped legislators from southeast New Mexico would help.

"I think it's going to be up to our legislators to fight for that money too," Wallach said.

And because of the attention the clinic's plight has received - generating media inquiries, letters from the mayor of Hobbs and several state legislators - the organization's budget increased to almost \$1 million for the fiscal year beginning July 1. Lewis wasn't sure what the Hobbs clinic's share of that would be, but speculated it might be \$150,000.

While the new budget is a boon for the next fiscal year, it doesn't change their situation this year.

"The department, in this current fiscal year, doesn't have any resource that it can make available," said Secretary of Health Alex Valdez.

Falling through the cracks

Those affected are what David Vargas, Community Dental's executive director, calls the working poor. They are too poor to afford private dental care, but make too much money to qualify for government aid.

"The state funding is primarily for those people that fall through the safety net, and who don't qualify for anything because of their income," Vargas said. "They can make \$1 over (the federal limits), and they don't qualify. So they come to us, and we can take care of them."

And everyone involved says dental care, far from being cosmetic, is integral to a person's general health.

"If you have an infection in your mouth, it affects the entire body," Vargas said. As an example, he noted that transplant recipients have to have all dental work done because of the infection factor.

He also noted that anyone who has ever suffered with a

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David Vargas

Community Dental executive director

toothache knows how important dental treatment is.

"Anybody who has had a toothache will know," Vargas said.

Dental hygiene links

Stephen Beetstra, chief of dental services at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, said several recent studies have noted a link between poor dental health and heart disease, diabetes and even premature births.

"If a pregnant woman has bad teeth and bad gums, she has a four or five times higher chance of having a pre-term birth," Beetstra said.

Beetstra described the exact reason as something of a medical mystery, but said one theory is that cavities introduce bacteria that might stimulate pre-term labor.

Because of the health risk, Vargas said his clinics would keep seeing people in pain.

"My instructions to Dr. Lewis are that if anybody shows up in pain, whether they are state funded patients or not we take care of them," Vargas said.

All others, however, must wait.

Come back in July

"We're telling them to come back in July," Vargas said, referring to the start of the new fiscal year July 1.

He said that since running out of money his organization had provided thousands of dollars in service at their own expense to see those patients.

"We are almost \$80,000 in the hole and there are two months remaining in the fiscal year," Vargas said.

What upset Vargas, Lewis and the many legislators supporting Community Dental's efforts to open a clinic in Hobbs, was what Vargas considers an unfair transfer of money.

Funds go to Albuquerque

At the very time when his clinics began running short of money, the state dental director moved \$125,000 to fund a clinic at the University of New Mexico that had not even opened its doors yet.

"The reason we're out of funds this fiscal year is that they cut an additional \$125,000 from our budget and it went to a clinic in Albuquerque that's not even built yet," Vargas said.

When contacted about the fund

transfer, the state dental director, E. Walter Wolford, said he had no comment.

While his clinic hasn't opened yet, Beetstra said his clinic will probably open around May 16 - possibly a little earlier. He also added that he feels caught in the crossfire over the issue, and hopes he can find a way to work with Vargas and Community Dental.

The disputed clinic will become one of about seven clinics treating indigents in the Albuquerque area. Beetstra said one problem his new clinic had was that they did not receive funding until January, halfway through the fiscal year.

"But I just want to make sure everybody knows the state is getting their money's worth," Beetstra said.

He also said the delay in opening the clinic resulted from difficulties in finalizing details of the clinic's agreement with the state.

"I wish the clinic would have been open a month ago," Beetstra said.

Some involved in the dispute worried that the money allocated to the new clinic had not been spent on treatment. Beetstra said some of the money went to purchase equipment instead of providing treatment, but added that the state's agreement required them to provide treatment equal to the number of dollars they spent on the equipment.

Difference of opinion

Whatever the status of the clinic, Valdez, whose department oversees Wolford and the dental division, said the dispute amounted to a difference of opinion between Wolford and Vargas.

"We have a disagreement as to whether that clinic is providing services," Valdez said.

Valdez did, however, say that his department would look into the clinic, and Vargas' objections to its funding at his organization's expense.

"That is an issue we have to get up to speed on and take a look at," Valdez said speaking of transfer of funds. "These questions deserve an inquiry and review from the Department of Health, and that's exactly what we intend on doing."

Sen. Carroll Leavell, who sent a letter to Valdez about Community Dental's budget problems, said the transfer of funds

did concern him and hinted that the Legislature might take the power to transfer the funds out of the Department of Health's hands.

"There's always that possibility," he said of the possibility of earmarking the money so the funds cannot be moved.

Leavell said, however, that he didn't want to use that option, but only indicated that the thought had occurred to him and other legislators.

"What happens with that is you start micromanaging state government," Leavell said. "I think for the most part Alex Valdez has done a good job as secretary of health ... they have authority to move that around through the year, (but) to move it to a clinic that's not been funded, I don't know, I've got a little problem with that."

Valdez said some of the dispute stems from the chronically low priority dental services in general often receive.

"I think it's important to note that the funding of dental clinics by the state and probably by other governmental entities is really kind of low," Valdez said. "There hasn't been a lot of dollars historically that has gone into funding dental clinics, so (we try) to get as much service as we possibly can for the type of dollar we have, and spread that out."

Dental service shortage

Vargas has another reason for objecting to the clinic's funding: It makes it harder for him to expand Community Dental's services in southeast New Mexico - an area suffering from a chronic shortage of dentists and other medical professionals.

"(That) clinic is not really needed, and we need additional help up in the southeast part of the state, and we have been trying to do this," Vargas said.

While Beetstra believes his clinic is needed, he does agree that the southeast part of the state needs more dentists.

"There's a problem with having dentists and oral-health providers throughout the state, (but) it's really bad in the southeast," Beetstra said. "We're doing everything we can to encourage more dentists to come into that part of the state."

He also added that he was looking forward to putting the dispute about the clinic behind him and forming a partnership with Community Dental.

"We want Community Dental to be a partner in what we do," Beetstra said. "We're looking at doing a residency program and if Community Dental could partner with us on the dental program we'd be able to send (dental) residents to Hobbs."

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