

Free dental clinic brings a smile to hundreds in Fairbanks

FAIRBANKS—Diana LaBumbard got in line for free dental care outside the Carlson Center before midnight Thursday. She wasn't the first person there.

LaBumbard was one of several hundred people who showed up at the Carlson Center to make use of a first-come, first-served dental clinic offering free care to anyone willing to wait. The two-day event aims to provide free care to as many as 1,000 people before closing Saturday evening.

Volunteers opened the doors at 4:30 a.m., but people began lining up long before then. According to lead organizer Chris Willis, one person arrived and began waiting as early as 10 a.m. Thursday. Another man hitchhiked from Anchorage for care.

Many of the patients at the clinic Friday have abided pain for a long time before having the chance for treatment.

Heather Willis is a dentist in Fairbanks and one of the lead organizers along with her husband, Chris. They were joined at the event by several local dentists, some of them retired.

Most of the resources were originally allocated to fillings, Heather said, but — after seeing the needs of people coming in — they were shifted to extractions. In an extraction, the tooth is fully removed from its socket in the bone, because the damage or decay is too far gone for repair.

"Some people have waited months for this event, just for that," Heather said. "People are delaying dental care, and they are waiting until it hurts."

Chris and Heather Willis worked together with Shannon Vargas and other Fairbanksans for months to make the clinic happen. Heather Willis brought the idea to Fairbanks after volunteering as a dentist at a similar event in Anchorage last year.

That event was put on by the Alaska branch of Mission of Mercy, a national organization that provides free health care and dental care to anyone, regardless of pre-qualification. Through Mission of Mercy, and with the help of the Alaska Dental Society Charitable Activities Fund and dozens of individual and business donations, the Fairbanks clinic became a reality.

Some patients at the clinic can't afford dental insurance, but many needed the clinic despite already having insurance. For LaBumbard, it's not an issue of having insurance. It's a matter of how much her insurance will cover.

LaBumbard has diabetes and is missing several teeth that have been destroyed by the decay the disease

brings on. She has dental insurance, she says, but has already used all her provider is willing to cover through two extractions earlier this year.

She said she went back and forth about whether she should come to the clinic.

"I didn't want to take someone else's spot," she said.

Eventually, she prevailed upon herself and decided to go. At 3 p.m., 15 hours after arriving Thursday evening, she was waiting in line to get a tooth extracted. Earlier in the day, she had already received a set of prosthetic front teeth, covering what had previously been blank space.

Despite spending her entire day in the Carlson Center, LaBumbard said she was glad she decided to go.

"I had the best dentist," she said. "I haven't heard a single person here, not one person has put (anyone) down."

To put on a clinic like the one in Fairbanks, organizers need roughly \$120,000 in donations to cover the cost of the supplies dentists will use. Thanks to support throughout the community, Mission of Mercy was able to secure even more than that, at \$135,000 and counting. They also had more than 500 volunteers.

The biggest challenge, according to Heather Willis, was getting the chairs and equipment — donated by the America's Dentists Care Foundation — from the Lower 48 up to Alaska. To get the dental chairs to Fairbanks, they needed to bring them to Anchorage by barge, then ship them to Fairbanks by train before finally getting them to the Carlson Center by truck. All of the transportation was donated by companies such as Lynden Transport and the Alaska Railroad, according to the organizers.

Despite the logistical worries, everything arrived in one piece and on time for the event. By the end of the day Friday, Chris Willis estimated they had served 400 to 500 patients.

Doors will open this morning at 4:30 a.m. for the final day.

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