

Mission of Mercy

Catholic Charities co-sponsors clinic where patients leave with dental care – and smiles

By Richard Szczepanowski
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Hours before daybreak on Sept. 8, the lines started forming outside the Xfinity Center on the campus of the University of Maryland in College Park. The people in line were not waiting for tickets to a basketball game

or other sporting event, but to receive dental care they might not otherwise be able to afford.

They waited to be treated as part of the Mission of Mercy dental clinic jointly sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, the Mid Maryland Dental Society and the University of Maryland's Center for Health Equity.

"Oral health is important. It is hard to be healthy if you can't eat. It is hard to have self-confidence if you don't smile," said Deacon Jim Nalls, director of Catholic Charities' Family, Parish and Community Outreach Department, who chaired this year's Mission of Mercy.

The clinic – which ran from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sept. 8 and Sept. 10 – saw nearly 1,000 people treated by a corps of about 250 volunteer dentists, hygienists, X-ray technicians, dental students and others.

While the doors to the clinic opened at 7 a.m., many people began waiting in line at 1 a.m., and the first two people in line began their wait at 7 p.m. the night before.

Since 2013, Catholic Charities has partnered with other groups to put on four other Mission of Mercy dental clinics in the state of Maryland. The clinic was last held at the University of Maryland in 2014.

It is estimated that about one-third of adult residents in Maryland live with untreated dental issues and about the same number have not visited a dentist in more than a year.

Organizers of the Mission of Mercy clinic said the services being offered at the clinic are vital because poor oral health has been linked to other chronic health issues such as heart disease, endocarditis, joint inflammation and rheumatoid arthritis, and a higher risk for stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

The floor of the Xfinity Center was transformed into a treatment facility that included 120 full-service dental stations. Among those treating patients was

Dr. Wenzell Carter, who recently retired after serving 35 years as a dentist in the U.S. Air Force. He spent the two days of the Mission of Mercy clinic performing oral surgery and tooth extractions.

"This makes me feel good serving like this to help people," he said. "You know most people cannot afford this dental work out of pocket, and if you don't have dental insurance, then you are out of luck."

Carlos Ramos was all smiles as he left the dental chair after having a tooth extracted.

"My mouth feels much better than it did before I sat in this chair," he said. He added that his employer notified him of the services offered at the mercy clinic, and gave him the time off to attend.

Dr. Stephen Thomas, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Health Equity, said the clinic is an opportunity "to give these people hope. We want to meet people where they are and provide them with what they need in terms of their health."

Dr. Thomas said that in addition to

routine dental work, the clinic this year also included a lab so that dentures and crowns could be made on site.

"We have people who have not smiled in years leave here smiling," he said.

Deacon Nalls said that "We've gotten much more sophisticated in the services we offer and more significant dentistry with a greater work value" was offered at this clinic than at previous ones.

He added that while the final tallies are not yet compiled from this year's clinic, he has no doubt the value of the services will be more than the \$1.2 million in care offered the last time the clinic was held at the University of Maryland.

As patients waited to be treated by dentists, they had the opportunity to take advantage of "wrap around" services offered at the clinic by the Cigna Foundation, Adventist Healthcare and others.

Deacon Nalls praised the partnership between Catholic Charities, the university and the other providers.

"This is what we do at Catholic Charities – to get as many people as we can," he said. "I am so blessed to work with incredible people. We were there to help people and we were all thrilled to do it."

In addition to dentistry, the clinic offered services such as carbon monoxide monitoring, cholesterol and diabetes screenings, vision testing, information on weight loss and smoking cessation programs, as well as free hair cuts and free handouts outlining available free and low-cost health services.

One patient who identified herself only as Ellen said that the Mission of Mercy fills a vital role for people on a limited income.

"Medicare does not cover routine dental, hearing and vision care," she said. "I don't understand why because good teeth and good hearing and good eyesight are vital to good health."

"Oral health is important. It is hard to be healthy if you can't eat. It is hard to have self-confidence if you don't smile."

DEACON JIM NALLS

Director of Catholic Charities' Family, Parish and Community Outreach Department

Medicare does not cover most dental care or dental procedures, but will cover emergency dental care in some cases. Also, less than half the states in this country provide comprehensive dental care for



The University of Maryland's Xfinity Center was transformed into a dental clinic Sept. 8 and 10 as a team of 250 volunteer dentists, hygienists, X-ray technicians, dental students and others provided more than \$1 million in dental care to people in need.

Medicaid-eligible adults.

Rocco Tedesco, one of two denture makers who traveled from central Virginia to work at the clinic, said that most patients would receive their free dentures

something for you."

In addition to providing dental care and screenings, the clinic also connected participants with resources for ongoing health care support.

Dr. Thomas said that visitors to the clinic also have the opportunity to a download smartphone "app" that allows service providers and patients to stay connected.

"We want to put health advocates in reach of people who normally would not have the access" to such people, Dr. Thomas said.

At the end of the two-day clinic, Deacon Nalls said that he was pleased with the services provided to the community.

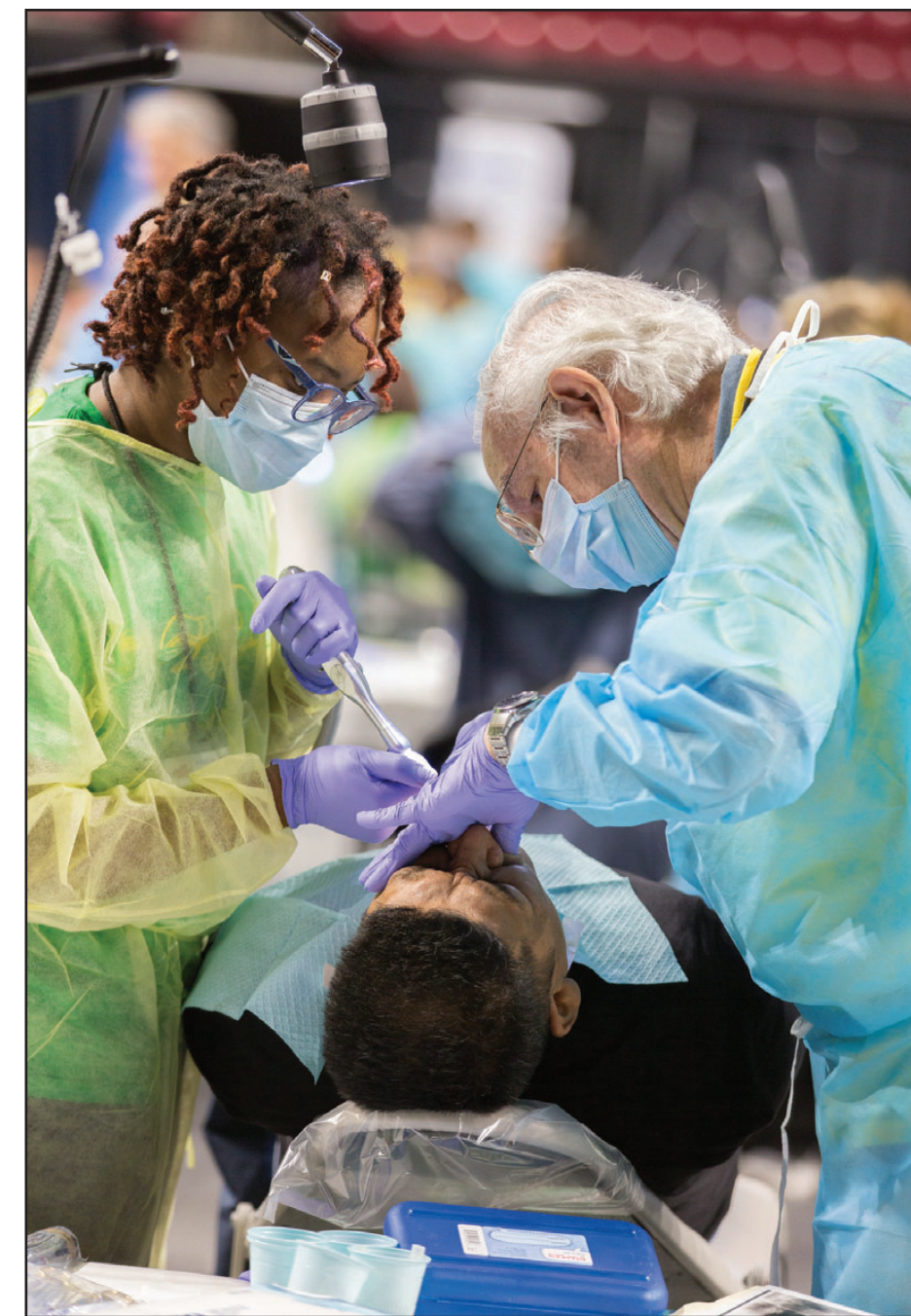
"A lot of people got served in a very substantial way," he said. "And they were served with dignity and kindness, and that is very gratifying."

within one or two hours after being fitted for them.

"You have to give back to the community," he said, "because one day you will be asking the community to do



A patient thanks a volunteer dentist after receiving treatment at the Mission of Mercy clinic. In addition to dental services, the clinic offered carbon monoxide monitoring, cholesterol and diabetes screenings, vision testing, information on weight loss and smoking cessation programs, as well as free hair cuts and handouts outlining available free and low-cost health services.



CS PHOTOS BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN

A volunteer dentist and hygienist work on a patient at the Mission of Mercy clinic at the University of Maryland that was jointly sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, the Mid Maryland Dental Society and the University of Maryland's Center for Health Equity.