

## **ACROSS THE SMILES**

### **Northeast Oral Health Initiative**

A new mobile dental program in rural northeastern Connecticut, established by Generations Family Health Center, Inc., called **ACROSS THE SMILES**, was on the road April 1, 2002. The **ACROSS THE SMILES** program is the result of a two-year planning process conducted by the Northeast Oral Health Initiative, an ad hoc committee composed of a dedicated group of community leaders concerned about the poor access to oral health care for Medicaid and uninsured populations. Members of this group included Generations Family Health Center, Inc., Day Kimball Hospital, Northeast District Department of Health, Northeast Transit District, Northeast Council of Governments and a local pediatric dentist.

Funding made possible by the Connecticut Office of Health Care Access enabled Generations to purchase a 40-foot mobile unit, fully equipped with two dental operatories that is wheel chair accessible. Start-up operational funding was received from the Connecticut Department of Social Services for the first year and the Connecticut Department of Public Health recently awarded bonding funds to assist in the provision of on-site power sources for the program.

The program will serve 12 of 15 towns in rural Windham County. Because of rural nature of the area, none of these towns have fluoride in their water. Services will provide routine preventive and restorative dental care. The program was initiated in the public school systems and when school is not in session, the van is traveling to town recreational centers, local Head Start programs and daycare sites, nursing homes, and community centers. A READ WHILE YOU WAIT program has been started at the local libraries and will continue throughout the summer.

The initial phase of the program began with dental screenings in the school system in collaboration with the Northeast District Department of Health. The screening process precedes the van to identify the children in most need as well as providing a baseline of the overall needs in the area. The preliminary screening results show that out of 71% of total students screened, 26% have gross caries in one quadrant and 11% of these students have multiple quadrant involvement. This is a tongue blade and flashlight screening, so the actual caries rate when a mirror, explorer and x-rays are used will be much higher. The grades K-6 have the highest an overall caries rate of 30%, and Putnam one of the larger school districts has a 40% caries rate in these grades.

The van has visited 22 sites in the first three months of operation and out of the first 325 children treated on the van, 40% had a dD/dDMfF ratio of 1 and another 17% had a ratio >0. The ratio is a measure of treatment need in patient base that we are treating; specifically it measures the untreated caries in the children the van has seen. The higher the ratio the higher is the unmet need. This indicates that our program is reaching children who need care.

The challenges of this program are unique and its success depends on its community team approach. Without the support of the superintendents, nurses and the teachers in these twelve towns, the **ACROSS THE SMILES** program could not reach these children. But most of the support comes from the excitement of the children when the van is present at their school. The initial screenings seem to have alleviated fears and a momentum is building within the schools so the children are excited to have a visit on the van.

Even in the very early stages of this program, the community support has been wonderful, not only from the health and government agencies, but also from a trucking company providing a garage for the van, to a sewage company offering its services, to the students of a local technical school's placing power sources at sites the van will be visiting.

Immediate goals of the program are to reduce access barriers to care and to address the urgent needs of the children by reducing their pain and providing preventive and routine restorative services. An educational program will be developed to raise the awareness of oral health issues in the community. In the longer term, we hope to see the impact this program has on the restorative needs of the children in the area. Good dental health is the foundation for good general health, and good dental habits formed early provide dental as well as general health benefits that can last a lifetime.

Dr. Margaret Ann Smith