

Profile of America's Mission of Mercy

By Bill Brennan

Purpose – To combine the donated services of dentists, dental hygienists and lay volunteers to provide free dental clinics nationwide to reduce health risks and suffering for those who cannot afford dental care.

Description – The Mission of Mercy is a one or two-day clinic in which portable dental stations are set up in a large public arena and dental screenings and services are provided at no charge to those who attend. The event also requires one day for set-up and another for cleanup. Historically, demand for these clinics has been so intense that individuals often stand in line, as early as midnight, to receive the services.

Usually the event is so large and the lines so long that communities often provide liquids and meals for those in line to avoid medical emergencies. The most common dental procedures are extractions, fillings and cleanings for adults and fillings and sealants for children, but some dentists do arrange to provide restorative work when the patients are younger and the teeth are cosmetically or functionally important. In addition, if someone is missing a few teeth, plastic partial dentures are constructed. Dentists and dental hygienists in the state (and nearby states) are recruited to volunteer their services. The host community is asked to provide several hundred volunteers to help with support services. Most often partners in the project include the local health department and hospital. Local law enforcement usually assists with crowd control. The state's School of Dentistry and department of Health and Human Services also assists in the set-up of the clinic

Background – According to the Washington Post, the first Mission of Mercy took place in Virginia in July 2000, funded by \$36,000 from a local philanthropist. At the state level, Mission of Mercy events are taking

place in Arkansas, Connecticut, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia (and West Virginia). In 2009 Mission of Mercy will grow to include at least 11 states (adding New Jersey, New Mexico and Wisconsin) and others planning for future years (Discussions are in progress in Maryland, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Utah and Vermont).

Board of Directors – In the spring of 2008 board 14 members from the seven Mission of Mercy states and Iowa and Wisconsin met to organize the America's Mission of Mercy (AMOM). The group has filed articles of incorporation for 501c 3 status. Approval is pending.

Strategic Plan – AMOM has organized to provide the resources for nationwide clinics in at least the 48 contiguous states. The board members have a long-term objective of at least 1 Mission of Mercy event for every 2 million people (obviously some populated areas will have a greater need than others). Usually the Mission of Mercy events are rotated among different communities in the state. As an example, Nebraska has a large geographic area and a population of 1.7 million people. The event moves around the state, which enables the same low-income residents (often restricted by transportation issues) to attend an event at least every two or three years. AMOM seeks assistance through grant funding to set up its organizational structure, purchase equipment for the growth of Mission and Mercy and the addition of new states over the next three years, and develop the resources to assist MOM projects at the state level. AMOM is working with JVA Consulting of Denver, Colo., to create a fund development plan.

Cost – The new organization seeks \$500,000 this year and \$3 million over the next three years to provide funding for the portable dental stations that are used to provide chairs for use at the dental clinics. Each \$500,000 will provide 100 dental stations that can be stored in a single semi

trailer and then are transported to several clinical sites a year. These portable dental stations have a shelf life between 35-40 events and include the chair, lighting, air dryer, vacuum, instruments and other materials that will provide the capability for full patient services within the clinic setting. The dental stations will be "leased" to each state at a cost of \$300 per station if the order is fewer than 40 stations and \$250 per station if the order is more than 40 stations. These funds will be used to pay for maintenance, repair, insurance, storage and instrument replacements. They would not cover the cost of replacing the stations. The plan is to seek additional grants or funds to replace the stations as the project expands

Capacity – On a state and regional level, Mission of Mercy events have been taking place since 2000. Virginia has provided 5,365 patients with more than \$1.8 million worth of free dental care. Texas Mission of Mercy has treated a total of 12,327 patients, providing \$4.4 million in charitable dental services. The other five Mission of Mercy states (Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Kansas and Nebraska) have provided services to 26,500 patients at a value of \$11.2 million.

The Mission of Mercy project has developed a "cookbook" (written guidelines on how to host a dental clinic), which is shared with each new state and communities that host Mission of Mercy events. In addition, experienced personnel from a Mission of Mercy state assist new states as they decide to host clinics. Within a state, the Mission of Mercy co-chairs (usually a dentist a health department director) from the community that most recently hosted a Mission of Mercy clinic participate and assist in the planning and implementation with the community that is hosting the next Mission of Mercy clinic. This process of sharing and guidance has led to more than xx clinics over the past decade.

Further information on Mission of Mercy events and their success are available at:

<http://www.adcfmom.org/>