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Passavant Memorial Homes takes dental lab mobile

Pittsburgh Business Times - by KRIS B. MAMULA

A nonprofit human services organization is preparing to launch Pennsylvania's first mobile dentistry van, extending care to people with disabilities who live in rural parts of the state.

Passavant Memorial Homes, which is based in Warrendale, formed subsidiary Accessible Dental Services Inc. to care for people who have Medicaid health care coverage, according to President Rick Senft. The mobile service will be launched following a two-year pilot, which provided dental care for people with disabilities and their families at four offices in the region.



Karen Noah, a registered nurse and the director of operations for Accessible Dental Services Inc., stands in the company's new mobile dental lab - Joe Wojcik

“Dental care for people with intellectual disabilities is very hard to come by across Pennsylvania,” he said. “We tried to be innovative and start our own program, then branched out to serve other social service agencies.”

Passavant provides residential living and related services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities or mental illness. Accessible Dental Services has four offices — Rochester, Murrysville, Green Tree and Uniontown — and mobile dental services is the agency's newest.

Some patients at the Rochester clinic said they had driven three hours to make appointments, according to Karen Noah, director of operations, including the need for services close to where patients live. The first dental clinic opened in December 2006 with 19 patients, which has grown to 134 patients this month.

“It started slowly, but it ramped up very rapidly,” Noah said.

In addition to Passavant's clients, the clinics serve 48 other social service agencies. The van was delivered two weeks ago and cost \$300,000; FISA Foundation and Highmark Foundation each donated \$75,000, and the balance was came from fundraising events. Senft said the goal is to make the service self-supporting.

"Dental has been identified as the No. 1 unmet need for the special needs community" said Dr. Paul Westerberg, chief dental office at the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. "We are committed to meeting this need and it has been a challenge."

A recent study by the South Side-based ACHIEVA, a social service organization, found that people with developmental disabilities have significantly higher rates of poor oral hygiene, which has been linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular problems including stroke and heart disease. Access and a dearth of dentists who treat people on Medicaid are among the reasons this population has been underserved, according to Gabrielle Sedor, spokeswoman for Pennsylvania Service Network for Autism and Intellectual Disabilities, a Harrisburg based advocacy group.

"The reimbursement rates are quite low," Sedor said, "and extra time is needed to treat this population for rates that may cover your costs."

Accessible Dental Services is collaborating with the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine to allow third and four-year dental students to rotate through the program, said COO Patrick DeMico. Dentists and anesthesiologists from areas served by the van, including such places as Dubois, Erie and Clearfield, will also be invited to treat patients in the unit, which is equipped with two treatment rooms and a lift for wheelchair access.

"It's very exciting that they're finally getting it off the ground," Sedor said.