



Dental care for disabled takes step forward

By [Rick Wills](#)

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For many people, a visit to the dentist is one of the year's most dreaded events.

But for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, a dentist's chair is often so overwhelming that they can't be treated at all -- even if a dentist is willing to treat them, said Karen Noah, director of Accessible Dental Services, a Marshall nonprofit set up four years ago by Passavant Memorial Homes.



[Karen Noah](#) Justin Merriman | Tribune-Review

Accessible Dental thinks its new mobile dental unit -- a RV equipped with two dental chairs -- is a good step toward improving dental care for the disabled.

The mobile unit, paid for with grants from the Highmark and FISA foundations, was introduced Friday and will be hosting clinics throughout Western Pennsylvania by the end of this year. Accessible Dental works with 48 agencies and 130 families.

Problems people with disabilities face in getting dental care are almost endless. They range from poor Medicaid reimbursement rates, noncompliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, some dentists' refusal to treat the disabled, and severe patient anxiety, Noah said.

"Anxiety is often a problem for developmentally disabled, who often need to be sedated for routine checkups," she said.

Geography is another problem. Accessible Dental has office locations in Rochester, Green Tree, Murrysville and Uniontown. Yet patients come from as far away as Bradford, DuBois and Warren to receive care.

"People will drive two or three hours for dental care. That shows how serious a problem this is," Noah said.

Inexperience in treating patients with developmental and intellectual disabilities is another problem, which is why Accessible Dental is partnering with the University of Pittsburgh's School of Dental Medicine for training, Noah said.

Nancy Davis, CEO of ARC Fayette, a Uniontown social services agency for people with disabilities, said she has seen inadequate dental care in her clients for decades.

"I don't like being at the dentist at all. But I at least understand what's going on," Davis said. "With intellectually disabled people, they don't always get it. They see the machines coming at them, and it all just becomes too much."