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By Anne Berquist
Foundation Director of Development

Mission of Mercy Moves to Flint in June 2024; Save the Date and Participate

People choose to work in dental services primarily out of a passion to help others by alleviating and preventing pain and facilitating general health. Some dentists

go on missions to other countries where they navigate language barriers and challenging environments to deliver oral health care to those who otherwise would have no access to it.

In 2024, compassionate dentists, specialists dental assistants, dental hygienists, and laypeople will have the opportunity to help people right in their home state, as the MDA Foundation brings its fifth Mission of Mercy, or MOM, to Flint, a community that long has struggled economically and which drew national attention due to its contaminated water crisis.

The MOM will occur June 13-16, 2024, at the Dort Financial Center, 3502 Lapeer Road, in Flint. Dental care will be delivered to those seeking help between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., June 14 and 15. The on-site clinic will be built June 13 and torn down June 16.

The MDA Foundation is excited to bring this state's fifth MOM to Genesee County, after having to cancel the event in 2020 due to the emergency orders necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2024 event will follow whatever Centers for Disease Control recommended COVID-19 measures are in place at that time, including spacing the temporary operatories further apart as needed.

What happens at a MOM?

The purpose of a MOM is to provide access to dental care to those who need it. While nearly everyone who receives care at a MOM is uninsured and cannot afford dental care, anyone who is in line for evaluation and treatment by the time the MOM closes will be seen. People begin getting in line at about midnight the day the clinic opens, as patients are taken on a first-come, first-served basis.

Each patient registers for care, provides a health history, and undergoes medical screenings and necessary treatments for medically compromising conditions such

as extremely high blood pressure or untreated diabetes. In view of COVID-19, patients will be screened for elevated temperature and other symptoms. Next, the patient moves on to triage, where an overall oral health assessment is conducted and the most-urgent treatment needs are identified. Each patient is then escorted by

a volunteer patient ambassador to the proper treatment area within the clinic. Treatment areas include hygiene, restorative, oral surgery, endodontics, and pediatrics.

Each patient receives treatment for the individual's primary oral health need. A patient with multiple needs may return to the line to await further care. At the end of treatment, patients have a consultation to advise them of follow-up care needed and alternatives to obtain the treatment. Education about oral health is also provided. Patients leave with resources in hand to access ongoing dental care.

How have previous MOMs helped those in need?

Previous Missions of Mercy in Michigan have provided nearly \$4 million in free dental care to several thousand people. Each of the previous MOMs delivered between \$885,000 to more than \$1 million in free dental services to participants. About 1,000 people were served by each MOM, and typically 6,000 dental procedures were delivered at each previous event. Previous locations were Saginaw Valley State University in Saginaw, Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Macomb Community College in Warren, and Calvin College in Grand Rapids. The Flint area was selected for 2024 because of the need for service and the Dort Financial Center's ability to provide the large space and varied electrical needs for the event.

Your important role

Your MDA peers volunteer their time and effort to help coordinate the MOM, and receive essential support from the MDA's continuing education, marketing and commu-



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nications, and government and insurance affairs departments. The most important thing members of the dental community can do is to volunteer to provide their expertise to the MOM. All the MOM leaders volunteer their clinical skills, and ask that you consider participating, too.

Drs. Steve Harris and Margaret Gingrich are co-chairs of the 2024 MOM and have participated in each previous event. They have seen how peoples' lives are changed because of the care they receive at a MOM, and the satisfaction they experience from participating is unrivaled in their careers.

"At each of these events I've worked, everyone had a grin from ear to ear," Dr. Harris comments. "Everyone who has a part in the event feels so good about themselves afterward for giving back in different ways. I hear so many thank-yous, from patients and from volunteer dentists, hygienists, assistants, specialists, and front-desk staff at the event. It provides such a great sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. I especially enjoy what I call the 'Kiss and Cry' area, which is where patients who have had prosthetics made are able to see themselves with a great smile for the first time in years. What we take for granted is a big thing for the person we are serving, and there is no better feeling than helping someone who doesn't have the means to be able to care for themselves."

Dr. Gingrich adds, "I've been on dental missions overseas and in Alaska, but for me, the Mission of Mercy is even more rewarding because it gives me the means to make Michigan a better place by helping the people around us here in our home state. In addition to feeling great about helping others, you get the added benefits of making new connections and friendships that can last a lifetime. And, if you recruit your dental team to participate with you, it's an excel-



Many volunteers — This photo from 2018 illustrates the size and scope of the MOM treatment area, and the many MOM volunteers.

lent bonding and team-building experience. Volunteering helps your staff see you as more than just a boss, but also as a leader and someone who has compassion! No matter how much hard work you put in at the MOM, you will get so much more out of it than you put in."

Local Co-Chairs Drs. Steve Sulfaro, of Holly, and Denise Polk, head of the dental assistant program at Mott Community College, encourage all clinicians to participate in the MOM for however long they can spare.

"I would love it if we could see 2,000 people in the two days," Dr. Polk says. "MDA members can help by volunteering their time, be that a half day, a whole day, or for both days of treatment. This is occurring on Father's Day weekend, but what better Father's Day gift is there than giving someone the gift of a smile? We're counting on the dental community to help us make this MOM possible."

Dr. Sulfaro acknowledges that the pandemic-induced gap between the 2018 and the 2024 MOM events makes it more challenging to reactivate those who have participated as volunteers in the past, and to recruit new

volunteers. "Overcoming the inertia of a lengthy pause may be difficult," Dr. Sulfaro says. "There still seems to be a general malaise, and people seem accustomed to being hunkered down. But this is such an amazing opportunity to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, to step up and help our fellow man, to be able to say; 'I was a party to something in Flint that weekend that changed peoples' lives, gave them hope and made Flint a better place to live.'

"Let's get the word out. It's time to come together as a statewide dental community and work shoulder to shoulder to help the people of an area that has had more than its share of challenges and black eyes in the past. Let's make the dental community shine."

When the call for volunteers goes out early in 2024, please respond. Consider volunteering with your entire dental team so they can know the joy of participating in a statewide humanitarian event. If you have questions about the MOM, or how you can help, please call me at 800-589-6236, ext. 423, or email me at aberquist@michigandental.org. ●