

No Mercy

Dentists question why CCRI ended program to help poor

By ETHAN SHOREY, Valley Breeze Managing Editor

LINCOLN – A volunteer effort providing dental care to thousands of people in need has been shelved, leaving those who organized it asking what went wrong.

The Rhode Island Mission of Mercy Dental Clinic was one of the most fulfilling efforts they ever took part in, say a group of dental professionals who helped run the clinic over the past five years. They said they were baffled when staff at the Community College of Rhode Island ended the effort, cancelling this year's event.

Staff at CCRI say they simply couldn't commit to helping with the effort any longer, and that the Mission of Mercy, as it was running, doesn't fit the school's goals for the future.

Volunteer dental professionals say the decision to end the Mission of Mercy was "a shock," emphasizing that they believe the effort fulfilled a moral obligation to the state's vulnerable citizens.

Libby Swan, executive director of the Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation and program coordinator for the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy, said there was no good reason for the state community college to end what was an "amazing" program. The volunteer dental clinic at CCRI in Lincoln was the "best scenario for patient treatment," she said, and now many uninsured or underinsured people across the area are without the annual dental care they critically need.

From 2012 to 2016, volunteers performed 15,843 oral procedures, exams and screenings, worth a total combined value of \$2.3 million. The work was done with the mission of "working together for healthy smiles," but it was so much more, they said, as experts were able to diagnose health problems and get patients medical help.

Dr. Jeffrey Dodge, a Woonsocket dentist and president of the Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation, said the Mission of Mercy was "a great service to a large number of people." Patients received much more than dental care, he said, getting screened for illnesses like HIV, breast cancer, and Hepatitis C. Many were kept out of the state's emergency rooms, where they would receive "no definitive care," he said.

Dr. John Kiang, a Providence dentist, said he "can't emphasize enough the need that is out there in our state" when it comes to dental care, and the dental health clinic at CCRI's Flanagan Campus in Lincoln, the largest clinic in the state, provided the only suitable place to run the free

initiative. The college runs a Dental Hygiene program there year-round.

People walked out of this clinic new people, said Kiang, free of pain and ready to get back to life.

“It boggles my mind that we cannot treat patients in need,” he said. “It kind of guts me a little bit that we’re not able to do that.”

The Mission of Mercy at CCRI was easily accessible to everyone who needed it, said Kiang.

“To have something like this go away just really impacts the community,” he said.

CCRI President Meghan Hughes deferred comment on the situation to the school’s public relations staff.

Kristen Cyr, public relations officer for CCRI, said school officials came to the conclusion that the Mission of Mercy wasn’t the right fit.

“After ongoing discussions with members of Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation Board of Directors that began in spring 2016, CCRI determined we would be no longer would be able to host the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy free dental clinic in our dental health clinic at the Flanagan Campus,” she said. “We instead offered the use of our field house at either that campus or the Knight Campus in Warwick free of charge, and offered to absorb the approximately \$10,000 in costs related to setup, security and use of the facility for the weekend.”

But Swan and Dodge said the cost of bringing in a portable dental clinic to the field house would have exceeded \$70,000, far too much to keep the volunteer effort going. Imagine, said Swan, a situation where volunteers are forced to set up a large-scale clinic from scratch while an existing one sits empty right next door.

In a letter to Dodge last April, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs Rosemary Costigan said CCRI would no longer be able to meet facility and staff requirements to continue the Mission of Mercy at the school.

Volunteers say they don’t feel they were given due process during the decision-making process, or that they were given the opportunity to fully explain why the Mission of Mercy should continue.

During the two-day Mission of Mercy, traditionally held the weekend after Memorial Day, some 700 volunteers were able to meet an “enormous need” and alter the lives of so many in a positive way, said Dr. Frederick Hartman, an oral surgeon.

“Every hour that was happening,” he said.

Swan said volunteers would have gone public with their frustration about the school earlier, after being notified last March that last year's Mission of Mercy would be the last at CCRI, but felt over the past few months that they had a chance to convince the school that the clinic should be maintained.

Cyr provided The Breeze with a May 10, 2017, letter giving volunteers three reasons for ending the program:

- That the school must prioritize use of academic spaces in a way that aligns with the mission of the CCRI, which is to educate students. The demands on faculty and staff helping with the Mission of Mercy increased over five years, she said.
- That the college's dental health program will undergo an accreditation process and faculty must prepare for it.
- And that the school uses the dental health clinic as academic space for students. The presence of CCRI faculty is necessary to ensure that the lab continues to properly function as that learning space.

Volunteer dentists say they told CCRI staff on many occasions that they were willing to take on more of the burden for running the Mission of Mercy, even taking it over completely if needed, but were repeatedly turned down.

"If you don't allow anyone to help you, then don't complain about the work," said Dr. Barbara Cavicchio, an oral surgeon from North Providence.

Marcia Braganca, of Patterson Dental, said volunteers valued the equipment they used like it was their own. Braganca said Patterson Dental was responsible for developing the clinic at CCRI and she knows the facility "intimately." She said she's "more of an expert on the equipment" at the school than those who run the clinic. There is no need to even have CCRI staff at the Mission of Mercy events if they don't want to be there, she told The Breeze.

Cyr said CCRI saw the Mission of Mercy as a point of pride for the school. Staff spent hundreds of hours before and after the event transforming the educational facility to a clinic and then back again, she said.

The model that 32 other Missions of Mercy across the U.S. use is to hold the event in a field house, she said.

"CCRI wants to continue this partnership next year in one of our field houses, either Lincoln or Warwick, free of rental charge and with \$10,000 in costs related to the use of that space," she said.

Kiang said the Mission of Mercy was running with no issues by its fifth year. He said it's a shame

that a facility built with taxpayer money would be shut off to Rhode Island residents who need it so badly. It makes no sense, he said, that some of the very ones who helped build the facility would now be prevented from volunteering there.

Dodge said the nursing and hygiene programs at CCRI are “shining stars” and that Kathleen Gazzola, chairwoman of the dental health and dental hygiene program at the school, runs a “well-oiled machine.” The Mission of Mercy gave students a real-life way to put their learning into practice, he said.

All board members said there is no doubt in their mind that the relationship with CCRI was ended because Gazzola didn’t feel like CCRI was getting enough credit for the part it played in the Mission of Mercy. They said Gazzola stated in several meetings that she wanted the school to get more credit.

Gazzola did not return a call for comment.

Swan said the Mission of Mercy wouldn’t work if everyone was getting credit for what they do. With this mission, “you check your ego at the door,” she said, “without any agenda or wanting anything back.”

Kiang said he thinks there was some confusion about who was actually running the Mission of Mercy, with people thinking that CCRI was somehow responsible for operating it.

Swan said CCRI leaders have gushed many times about the Mission of Mercy. Past President Ray Di Pasquale, at a 2012 Statehouse press event, said the Mission of Mercy fit the community college’s mission. In a 2013 promotional video, Gazzola said, “To be able to use our state-of-the-art dental health facility is a wonderful way to give back to the community because we are the Community College of Rhode Island.”