

TOM WARD - CCRI should be ashamed

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It is common to see things go on in government that leave you shaking your head in wonderment. In fact, I'll bet there are good members of the General Assembly who privately sit in amazement, too, at what goes on around them.

One story that left me cold, and should shame the Community College of Rhode Island – a “government” entity staffed by state employees – is our report last week about officials there no longer allowing the Mission of Mercy dental clinic to operate. The clinic, set up annually at the end of the school year, used volunteer dentists, hygienists and students to provide dental care to people who were not insured and could otherwise not afford any help.

“From 2012 to 2016,” we reported, “volunteers performed 15,843 oral procedures, exams and screenings, worth a total combined value of \$2.3 million.” This according to the R.I. Oral Health Foundation, which brought Mission of Mercy to our state. It costs taxpayers nothing.

Why CCRI? Because on Lincoln's Flanagan Campus, that's where a state-of-the-art public clinic already exists. It is there to train students as dental hygienists, a clinic paid in some part by dentists who were taxed to help create the facility many years ago. It has worked well in partnership with dental professionals for decades, training students for good jobs in the field.

The excuses coming from CCRI have been lame to non-existent. It seems they just don't feel like doing it anymore. They have offered use of the field house, but that would cost dentists \$70,000 to set it up and break it down over a weekend.

“Imagine a situation where volunteers are forced to set up a large-scale clinic from scratch while an existing one sits empty right next door,” said Libby Swan, executive director of the Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation. That would be stupid, and that's what CCRI suggests.

New CCRI President Meghan Hughes, an educator otherwise earning high marks for her work, has punted the dust-up to publicists below her. Dentists report many meetings were scheduled with CCRI in the past year, with Hughes signed on to attend, but she never showed up.

Here's the problem. Now Hughes has a much more pressing problem on her hands – the implementation of Gov. Gina Raimondo's “two free years of college” scheme set to descend on CCRI. There has been little time to plan for what emerged from the legislature. What began with inclusion of the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College has morphed into a watered-down, half-baked “save my political sound bite” plan by Raimondo and the General Assembly and dumped in Hughes' lap. So yes, today, Hughes has much bigger problems to

attend to. And as usual, it's a problem of the government's making.

Meanwhile, hundreds of vulnerable Rhode Islanders, young and old, are going about their lives – perhaps in pain, and without help. CCRI can do better. They choose not to.

Shock tax

It was refreshing last week to see National Grid officials complain to the state about having \$12.5 million purloined from their energy efficiency fund and used instead for (fill in the blank – free college – either for young students or former state Rep. Frank Montanaro Jr. kids – Medicaid, raises, whatever!) balancing the state budget.

Grid told Public Utility Commission officials what everyone should already know: If you steal our money to balance the state budget, we will just have to raise electric rates to replenish the pot and continue to work toward energy efficiency.

So, Grid complains, they are simply being used as a pass-through tax collector. And they are. You should be angry about that, because if you grin and bear it, the raids will grow.

Super cuts

I'll end on a positive note, with sincerity. RIDOT highway grass cutters are off and running – early – and doing a great job. If we hope to wow visitors to the state so they can pay a lot in taxes, having neat roadsides is a start. Well done!

Ward is publisher of The Valley Breeze.