

## **Jeffrey Dodge: CCRI turns its back on poor who used dental clinic**

By Jeffrey Dodge

Posted Jun 28, 2017 at 6:05 PM

Updated Jun 28, 2017 at 6:05 PM

What ever happened to that free dental clinic at the Community College of Rhode Island? The one that eased pain and gave new smiles to hundreds of vulnerable uninsured and underinsured Rhode Islanders? The one that saw over 600 volunteers join with community partners to change talk into action and help their fellow citizens in need? It seems that the free dental clinic known as the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy is about to fall victim to only-in-Rhode Island politics.

After five years of inarguable progress and success, the new CCRI president, Meghan Hughes, said, "Get out!" In doing so, she gave no valid explanation for the termination of this precious resource for our state's working poor. It was "no thanks," despite the fact the mission also provides immunizations, health screenings and serves as a conduit for families into regular medical and dental care. In fact, while waiting for a root canal in year three, a female patient had a breast cancer screening that led to her conclusive diagnosis and eventual treatment.

Can anyone explain why this taxpayer funded clinic sits empty, while patients suffer and eager volunteers scratch their heads? Can anyone explain how a person who was given the Rhode Island Foundation's Community Leader Award and is the president of CCRI won't even take a meeting or return a phone call to discuss this successful community event?

Without justification, Ms. Hughes has single-handedly brought the mission to an end.

If she were to take that meeting, we could point out that the majority of the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy's patients are minority and female, and are often responsible for an entire family of dependents. When we help these women, we help everyone who depends on them.

We'd love to articulate the plight of the working poor who line up every year at dawn for care that lets them make a rent payment, keeps them out of the emergency room, gets them out of pain and back to work, restoring their dignity and self-worth. We'd love to illustrate our flawless track record for safety and care for CCRI facilities these past five years.

In addition to explaining the clear community benefits, we would welcome an opportunity to demonstrate how the Mission of Mercy directly benefits the CCRI community. As an example, CCRI dental health students who volunteer at the mission are able to care for this very critical

population and gain a valuable and inspiring experience that will shape their careers. Let's not forget these CCRI students work alongside dozens of volunteer dentists who might one day become their employer.

When classes are over, the Mission of Mercy uses the empty clinic to put a face on the Rhode Island health-care system's failures. Each year, the mission gets the attention of legislators who take the time to visit and witness the good that is happening inside the walls of CCRI.

Every elected official with whom we discuss our plight is in full support, but somehow the Mission has still been shown the door. The Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation's Board of Directors, which runs the event, has tried in earnest to make it work, but CCRI won't even grant us due process to present our proposal face to face.

Would anyone else care to step up and lend a hand before the mission and those it serves become the latest unfortunate and preventable Little Rhody political casualties? Call Gov. Gina Raimondo. Call CCRI. Call your representative. Send us an email ([rionalhealthfoundation.mom@gmail.com](mailto:rionalhealthfoundation.mom@gmail.com)). Let your voice be heard.

*Jeffrey Dodge, a doctor of dental medicine, is president of the Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation. He wrote this on behalf of its Board of Directors.*