

CCRI hosts fourth annual free dental clinic

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[Knight Campus](#)

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Some 774 patients received free dental care ranging from cleanings to root canals to partial dentures with a value of nearly \$494,000 over the span of two days at the fourth annual Rhode Island Mission of Mercy dental clinic at the Community College of Rhode Island's Flanagan Campus last weekend.

"It's life-changing," said Dr. Jeff Dodge, president of the R.I. Oral Health Foundation, which runs the RIMOM event. "For the patients, for the volunteers, it's a win-win for everyone. As professionals, we like to give back, and this is what we've learned how to do. Some people can shingle a roof; we happen to be able to fix teeth."



Dr. John Kiang provides local anesthesia to prepare a patient for dental work at the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy free clinic at the CCRI Flanagan Campus. [View more photos from the event.](#)

The need for affordable dental care has been obvious here in Rhode Island, with patients lining up the night before the clinic every year, camping out to secure their place in line. Under a ceiling of fog at 5 a.m. on Saturday, the line had already stretched well into the parking lot as patients waited for the doors to open in an hour. One, Kire McCalvin, had been camped out since 4:30 p.m. Friday and was right at the front of the line.



Even with the cost of gas and a cheap hotel room for Saturday night, McCalvin anticipated that he would save at least \$1,000 for the services he needed – a prosthetic to replace a missing front tooth. His work as a third-party tech support contractor doesn't provide him with dental insurance and he has been without care for two years. When his last prosthetic was damaged, he couldn't afford to replace it. He said he is used to the missing tooth – which he lost in high school during a scuffle – but it's still something that affects his confidence.

"Dental care is very expensive, and it's something that people have to often deprioritize. People will be living in excruciating pain and have to decide if they're going to pay their rent or get a tooth pulled," he observed.

McCalvin, who drove five hours from Rouses Point, N.Y., on the Canadian border, said he hadn't slept all night. In addition to snacks and hot chocolate from the American Red Cross volunteer van, he was kept in good company by his fellow intrepid overnights. After Secretary of Health and Human Services Elizabeth Roberts opened the clinic doors at 6 a.m., these patients showed a palpable relief as they moved inside.

The 230 community volunteers were buzzing through the hallways, showing patients to the correct rooms, replenishing supplies and helping the well-oiled machine that is RIMOM start up.

Eve Hagerty of Woonsocket sat down in a folding chair outside of the registration area, waiting to be seen. Wrapped in a purple sleeping bag, she was all smiles despite being in pain from a broken front tooth. "This is my third time coming here; I've been without dental insurance for 12 years," she said. "It feels great to be inside. I'm scared, because teeth affect your health." She spoke of a friend whose tooth decay led to infection that affected her brain. "She now has a scar about 8 inches long on the side of her head and can't tell a circle from a square."

Indeed, for those without dental insurance, there's more at stake than the immediate pain and discomfort. Claire Creamer, a registered nurse practitioner who was one of the 330 medical and dental professional volunteers involved in the clinic, explained what was at stake between seeing patients in the medical triage center, where she and other nurses asked patients about their allergies, medications, and made sure they were healthy enough to proceed with dental work.

"The mouth is the window to the soul as far as a lot of health issues and such. There are a lot of opportunities to do other types of interventions with people who have a lack of health care, but dental is one of the ones that is really tough," she said. "It's a great feeling to meet with these people and see them leave the next day feeling much better."

McCalvin's trip through medical triage was straightforward, as was his visit to the dental triage center. For others, such as Hillary Andre of Providence, who was accompanied by her fiancée Shannon Salisbury and Salisbury's coworker, Stacy Nasisi of Woonsocket, problems were more complicated. Andre, who was out of work and had been without insurance since she aged out of her mother's plan at 19, had not been able to visit the dentist in six years. She said she probably needed a tooth extracted, and wasn't sure what else they would uncover.



"I love that it's free. Even people with dental insurance can't afford some of the things they need to do, so for everyone to put their time into this is just amazing," said Andre.

"It affects not only health, but morale and how people feel about themselves," added Salisbury, who came for moral support but, after going through dental triage, was set up for a cleaning. "I'm very thankful that this was put together."

Taritha Hill-Cooper of Providence, who had been in line about 20 people behind the couple, has dental insurance that her dentist no longer accepts, and she came early to get a painful loose tooth extracted.

Patrick Ormerod of Warwick, in line just ahead of Hill-Cooper, was in a similar dilemma – he had a cracked tooth that had been hurting him for two months. "It would have cost more than I could afford at my dentist," he said. "Without this program, there'd be a lot of suffering people."

The final step for McCalvin on the first day was a visit to the prosthodontic department, where Dr. Christopher Napolitano fitted him for his prosthesis. Napolitano, a third-year volunteer who has a private practice in Cranston, was one of the 95 dentists working around the clock at the clinic.

As Napolitano had McCalvin bite down on two trays filled with pink goo to get impressions of his upper and lower bite, he explained to McCalvin how the process would work. With John Mayer and other contemporary hits playing from a stereo set up in the hallway, even what is normally a classroom felt remarkably like a dental office.

"A patient's smile affects their whole personality," explained Napolitano. "If you're missing front teeth, you're more likely to be introverted and less likely to engage in conversation. Not only are we restoring patients' teeth, we are restoring their personality."

The effort was close to home for Napolitano; his father, Richard, and brother, Ryan, are owners of Premium Craft Dental, the lab that supplies all the prosthetics. After McCalvin came back the next day to be fitted with his new front tooth – the first patient of the second-day of the clinic – Richard Napolitano was on hand to shake his hand, even after working until midnight to get the prosthetics ready for 6 a.m. that morning.

"I worked on you last night," Napolitano said as McCalvin thanked him heartily.

McCalvin was on his way back to Rouse's point soon after that, his smile restored and his spirits lifted even after a grueling two days visit – other than sleep, he explained, the only thing he had a chance to enjoy in the Ocean State was Del's Lemonade and a taco for sustenance. But he was leaving with something far more valuable.

"I have to learn how to smile again instead of off to the side," he said. "It'll be easier to talk to people now face to face. I do feel more confident."

