



## **Dental help improves for low-income adults; Grant helps program that sees those in need with two half-day clinics**

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MARY LANE GALLAGHER  
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Interfaith Community Health Center has a few more spots for low-income adults who need dental work, thanks to a program that has dentists volunteering their services two days a month. The program just got a grant that organizers hope will give it more to run on than a volunteer spirit.

Dentists and other dental professionals have treated 170 people in two half-day clinics each month since the program started in May, said Dr. Ralph Peterson, the program's coordinator. The clinics have served people who couldn't wait for appointments in Interfaith's packed dental schedule. Many are people with painful emergencies who come to Interfaith hoping to see someone as soon as possible.

Interfaith Community Health Center, which serves low-income patients, devotes most of its dental program to children's dentistry, so adult appointments are hard to get. And many dentists in private practice limit the number of their patients who are adults with state-funded insurance, because of the low reimbursement rate.

"Traditionally, the adults are the ones that don't get funded and aren't getting seen as well as we'd like," Peterson said. But the volunteer dentists have made it easier to get help for adults who need it soon, said Dr. Carrie Hjort, Interfaith's dental director. "For someone with a toothache, it's hard to say we have an appointment open for four weeks from now," Hjort said. "If we know the volunteers are coming, we can put the adult patients in for that spot and they can get in a lot quicker."

The volunteers see 24 patients one Friday and one Saturday each month. Interfaith then bills the patients' insurance company, if they have it, or charges patients on a sliding-fee scale, depending on their income. Peterson works with 40 or so dentists who have donated about \$41,000 in fillings, extractions, root canals and other treatment.

A grant of about \$20,600 from the Washington Dental Service Foundation will help pay Peterson to coordinate the program. He had been volunteering his time. The grant also will help pay for supplies and for Interfaith staff to work at the clinics. Dr. Curt Smith, a retired Bellingham dentist who helped start the program last year, said paying the coordinator puts the program on more solid footing. "I hate to (just) keep telling Ralph, 'Thanks a lot,'" Smith said.

Peterson also hopes to soon develop a unified procedure to get patients into the clinics, and encourage more dentists to sign up to help. "We don't want to make it an onerous task," he said. "We would like them to volunteer once or twice, maybe three times a year."