

District to offer in-school dental care services

By Lauren Anderson | Associate Editor | Posted: Saturday, September 13, 2014 12:00 am

DeForest Area School District will host a new program this year in hopes of providing more students access to basic dental care.

Smiles 4 Life, a Waukesha-based non-profit organization that serves schools throughout the state, will provide oral hygiene services in all district schools beginning this year. While the program is open to all students, it will particularly benefit students who rely on BadgerCare insurance, as few area dental offices accept state Medicaid.

A licensed hygienist and dental assistant team will visit schools throughout the year to provide oral screenings, cleanings, fluoride varnish and sealants. The dental professionals will also educate classes and individual students on proper dental hygiene practices.

The program is provided at no cost to the schools. For those not on BadgerCare, out-of-pocket costs range from \$13 and \$29 for the services.

Smiles 4 Life Executive Director Christine Wolff said the organization formed two years ago in an effort to fill a need for preventative dental care among youth.

“I saw the number of families on state BadgerCare insurance rising as dentists accepting that form of insurance decreasing,” Wolff said.

When license regulations began allowing hygienists to work independently of dentists, Wolff saw an opportunity to send professionals into schools and provide dental care.

The organization expanded quickly and now serves about 245 schools, representing 75 districts. Last year, about 5,600 students received dental care through the program.

Students will receive two or three appointments during the school year. Smiles 4 Life also partners with local dental offices to provide emergency services to students who have needs outside the scope of the program. Often local dental professionals will agree to provide the care pro bono, Wolff said.

The program’s services play a role in helping students succeed in school, Wolff said, noting the connection between healthy teeth and learning.

“If we can teach them at an early stage the importance of oral health and supply two cleanings a year, that will keep them in the classroom more and learning, and give them a fighting chance,” Wolff said.

District Pupil Services Director Barb Buffington likewise touted the long-term benefit of students not

missing as much instruction time.

“When it comes to health care provided in schools, the goal is to keep students in school as much as possible,” she said. “It’s proactive dental care that will limit cavities through regular checkups, which means students will miss school less often by making fewer visits outside of school.”

A report from the Oral Health Coalition of Dane County in 2012 found 14 percent of middle and 13.5 percent of high school students in the county reported they had been absent from school because of gum or tooth pain in the last year.

The data also indicate a disparity along ethnic lines, with 10 percent of white students reporting dental pain-related absences, compared to 29 percent of African American students and 26 percent of Hmong students. Likewise, 6 percent of white students reported having not gone to the dentist in more than a year, compared to 39 percent of Hmong, 26 percent of African American and 22 percent of Hispanic students.

Wolff said she plans for Smiles 4 Life to continue its expansion into more schools to “bridge the gap” for students in need.

“Our goal is to continue to grow,” she said. “I don’t like to say no to any schools.”