

FEATURE

# Serving the Oral Health Needs of Our Nation's Military Heroes



BY KELLY ENGSTROM

## The Unmet Need for Veteran Oral Health Care

The vast majority of our country's 22 million Veterans do not receive oral health care through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The VA only provides full oral health care to a few select classes of veterans: 100% disabled veterans, former prisoners of war and veterans who have a service-connected dental disability or condition.

Additionally, VA's Dental Insurance Program (VADIP) is only available to Veterans enrolled in the VA health care system or beneficiaries of the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the VA (CHAMPVA). As a result, many Veterans, particularly those in rural areas, are not receiving the dental and oral health care they need.

Thankfully, several community health centers around the country have identified Veterans as a priority population for oral health services and are implementing innovative ways to connect with Veterans and provide them with much needed oral health services. One such health center is the Family Health Center (FHC) of Marshfield located in Northwest Wisconsin.

## About Family Health Center of Marshfield

The doors of Family Health Center first opened in March 1, 1974 as part of a unique partnership with Marshfield Clinic, a multispecialty group practice, and the Greater Marshfield Community Health Plan, an HMO. The partners shared a mission to provide comprehensive health services to all residents of Marshfield and contiguous area communities based on need, not ability to pay.

FHC has since expanded to serve patients at 32 clinic sites in 13 northwestern Wisconsin counties. In 2016, FHC's clinics served 87,000 patients, with patients coming to the health center from



every county across the state of Wisconsin.

As FHC prepared to open its second dental center in 2005, it learned from county Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) that access to oral health care for low income Veterans was the most difficult health related issue they faced. With that knowledge, the health center organization committed to addressing this problem both within the counties where dental centers were being built and within adjacent counties.

As Family Health Center's dental capacity grew, the organization adopted the goal that **NO Veteran anywhere in the State of Wisconsin need go without access to quality oral health services.** Progress towards achieving this goal has required aggressive community education and outreach efforts, including partnerships with CVSOs, Veteran-focused community based organizations and VA facilities throughout the state. The health center now operates 10 dental centers throughout the northwestern part of the State of Wisconsin.

## Launching the Oral Health Access Initiative

Family Health Center's *Oral Health Access Initiative* had a target area roughly the size of the state of Maine. Serving a population this large required both significant capacity and significant outreach efforts. To implement the Initiative, FHC took three major steps: develop the organization's physical capacity (in terms of both facilities and equipment); recruit and retain a strong talent pool of dentists, hygienists, and other vital staff members; and implement a targeted

outreach plan to expand awareness of the organization's offerings.

**Physical Capacity:** Through the Access Initiative, FHC expanded to 10 dental clinics making it one of the largest community health center dental programs in the country, and well within the geographic reach of Wisconsin's approximately 375,000 Veterans.

**Talent Pool:** Many of the communities most in need of oral health services are small and rural, which makes it difficult to recruit and retain high quality dental staff. To address this problem, FHC established partnerships with dental schools to host student rotations at several clinic locations.

**Targeted Outreach Plan:** Once it was felt that FHC had the capacity to serve the needs of the Veteran population, outreach efforts began, which included ads in the Wisconsin American Legion's newspaper and attendance at Veteran events.

As Family Health Center placed the upfront investment into caring for Veterans, the word spread to a wide variety of stakeholders. In the Spring of 2017, the health

center was invited by Wisconsin's Department of Veteran Services to participate in a CVSO training conference and present information about FHC's Veteran-focused oral health initiative to CVSOs from every county in the state.

## Partnerships

Throughout the implementation of FHC's Oral Health Access Initiative, partnerships with stakeholders were vital to the program's success:

**Dental Schools:** The health center worked with both the Mesa, AZ, and Kirksville, MO, campuses of A.T. Still University Dental School to offer a clinical rotation for their students at FHC clinic locations. These partnerships have made it possible for the health center to recruit and retain the necessary staff to serve Veterans throughout the state, particularly in rural and medically underserved areas.

**County Veteran Service Officers:** During the Spring 2017 CVSO Training Conference, FHC heard several stories of Veterans in desperate need of dental care

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resources. It worked with CVSOs to identify transportation programs that could ensure Veteran patients were able to travel to FHC's clinics to receive care.

### **Veteran Service Organizations:**

By partnering with Veteran-focused non-profit organizations like the American Legion, FHC was able to effectively "spread the word" and reach Veterans across the state.

### **Department of Veterans**

**Affairs:** After hearing about FHC's work in providing dental care for Veterans, the Tomah VA Medical Center reached out to the health center to establish a direct provider agreement to provide payment where possible to help them extend services and serve more Veterans.

## **Lessons Learned**

There are several important takeaways from FHC's efforts to expand services for Veterans that can be applied to other efforts to serve Veterans.

**Never assume. Ignorance is self-limiting.** FHC did not fully realize there was a need for Veteran dental services until they were told by County Veteran Services Officers.

**Board buy-in is vital** FHC's Board of Directors was very supportive and took risks to support and expand services and outreach for Veterans. Without this support, it would have been much more difficult to expand their services.

**VA can be a helpful partner.** Even when oral health benefits are limited, make contact with staff at local VA facilities and make the effort to build a strong relationship.

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**PROUD TO SERVE THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED!**

Family Health Center is committed to providing quality dental care to veterans. Call today to schedule your appointment.

Black River Falls Dental Center	(715) 870-0400
Chippewa Falls Dental Center	(715) 738-2000
Ladysmith Dental Center	(715) 532-2500
Marshfield Dental Center	(715) 221-5600
Medford Dental Center	(715) 785-8100
Menomonie Dental Center	(715) 238-1973
Neshville Dental Center	(715) 743-1900
Park Falls Dental Center	(715) 763-0200
Rhinelander Dental Center	(715) 420-1400
Rice Lake Dental Center	(715) 236-8900

**Family Health Center**  
of Marshfield, Inc.  
www.fhc.marshfieldwi.edu

Family Health Center Dental Centers provide friendly, affordable dental care for everyone. We accept all patients and payment types (Personal Health, Medicare, Medicaid, Self-Pay, and the uninsured). Based on income and household size, you may qualify for financial assistance for dental services.

**Serving people who have served is its own reward and boosts staff morale.** Providing dental care not only helps Veterans. It also provides an opportunity for service providers to honor Veterans.

## **Strengths of the Approach**

Family Health Center's program is a perfect example of the "ready-aim-fire" approach to dealing with a community/population need. First, the health center learned of a specific problem facing people in communities it served. It then designed a coordinated plan of action to address the problem with community partners, and implemented the program through a phased approach. As FHC gained experience, services were improved and expanded over time to maximize their results.

All of FHC's efforts were aimed at making its clinics and services "too good to fail" – serving so many groups of people in so many ways that political leadership at every level would see the importance and value of their work and take steps to protect the funding that makes it possible. Providing dental care does more than solve a health issue for Veterans – it helps to set them on a path for reintegrating into society, finding work, and, ultimately, improving their quality of life. ♦

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