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PHC Efforts Boost Access to Dental Care for Special-Needs Patients

For children and adults with developmental disabilities, getting dental care can be extremely difficult. Thanks to the Strategic Use of Reserves program at Partnership HealthPlan of California (PHC), as well as efforts by NorthBay Surgery Center at VacaValley and a caring team of dentists, access to care has greatly improved in recent months.

On two days each month, as many as four special-needs patients are undergoing dental surgery for severe tooth decay and other problems at the Vacaville surgery center, using equipment and dental instruments provided through PHC grant funding.

“We saw that some of our most vulnerable members weren’t getting the care they needed in the area of dental surgery, and we had to do something to improve the situation,” says Elizabeth Gibboney, CEO of PHC, a nonprofit managed care plan that administers Medi-Cal benefits in 14 Northern California counties.

While Medi-Cal does not provide dental care directly, PHC does cover anesthesia and facility fees for dental surgery. Gibboney says PHC was pleased to be able to go a step further as PHC’s Board of Commissioners last year approved \$60,000 in grant funding to promote access to dental care under anesthesia for members with special needs. Part of that funding went to the equipment and tools to be used by Dr. Rodney Bughao, DDS, and Dr. Kristina McGinley, DDS, to perform dental surgery at their twice-a-month special-needs days at the Vacaville facility.

“The equipment is everything that we need,” Bughao says. “It solves problems for a lot of people – problems of access and actual dental problems.” The list of equipment furnished by PHC includes everything from mirrors to clamps to forceps.

Bughao says that by making the effort to provide specialized care for patients with special needs, “their care givers and parents are able to feel at ease.”

In addition to the dental equipment at the Vacaville facility, a portion of the \$60,000 from PHC was spent on two new surgery chairs at PDI Surgery Center in Sonoma County (also known as the Pediatric Dental Initiative of the North Coast).

The new chairs allow PDI, a pediatric dental surgery facility, to dedicate one day a month to treating older children with special needs who require a larger, more specialized chair than ones used by PDI's mostly younger, smaller patients.

“The PDI/PHC partnership is unique in that it expanded on the partnership we already had in serving children with severe tooth decay and tackled yet another huge, unmet need of families struggling to find treatment for their children,” said Viveka Rydell, CEO of the nonprofit PDI.

Rydell says more than 30 patients have been treated using the larger chairs since they were put into use in January. On PDI's special-needs days, only a handful of patients can be seen because of the extent of care required compared to nine or 10 patients seen on a regular day, she says.

Carole Cherry of Sonoma says PDI is a “huge miracle” for her two daughters, ages 12 and 16, who are PHC members and both have autism. The girls were unable to sit through dental appointments, so went for years without dental care. Cherry's elder daughter, Iris Hamilton, had her first dental X-rays at age 14 at PDI. More recently, she was able to have a deep cleaning while under anesthesia in one of PDI's new chairs. No new cavities were found.

In addition to the \$60,000 spent on these projects, PHC has set aside \$100,000 and is exploring similar resources in its northern region, so rural residents will have access to these services closer to their homes.

About Partnership HealthPlan of California (PHC)

PHC is a nonprofit community-based health care organization that contracts with the State to administer Medi-Cal benefits through local care providers. PHC provides quality health care to more than 560,000 Medi-Cal members in 14 Northern California counties – Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Marin, Mendocino, Modoc, Napa, Shasta, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Trinity, and Yolo. Additional information can be found at partnershiphp.org.

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