

TOOTH TAXI PROFILES

Veneta Elementary School

Preparation, commitment make for a successful Tooth Taxi partnership

By Melody Finnemore



Community Health Centers Lane County provides an invaluable safety net for people in that region of the state who need dental care, but the need spans beyond what it can provide sometimes, says Marquita Corliss, BS, RDH, EP, the organization's dental coordinator.

"For years, what I've seen in the schools is the unmet need," Marquita says. "We offer prevention, but often it's too late for prevention by the time we look in the kids' mouths so they need a dentist."

Marquita knew there was a definite need for dental care at Veneta Elementary School. She is also aware that, for a variety of reasons, many parents have difficulty taking their children to a dentist, and access to care is an issue for the community. Marquita reached out to the school to tell them about the Tooth Taxi.



When the Tooth Taxi arrived for its first visit at Veneta Elementary in November 2013, Principal Olivia Johnson knew that a need existed in her school, but she was surprised by just how many oral health issues the Tooth Taxi staff identified among the children and the scope of care the staff provided during that visit and the four that followed.

During the first visit, the Tooth Taxi screened 44 students and 84 percent needed treatment. Tooth Taxi staff led a classroom oral health care presentation for 159 students during that visit, and provided \$26,596 in free dental services.

During its most recent visit in early February, the Tooth Taxi finished treating all of the children identified during the initial screening and screened another six students. In total, the Tooth Taxi's visits to Veneta resulted in 133 students screened, 289 students receiving oral hygiene presentations in the classroom, 150 appointments in the Tooth Taxi van, and \$89,855 in free dental services.

Olivia says one student needed dental work that wasn't covered by her parent's insurance and was going to cost the family \$1,500-\$2,000. As they worried about how to pay for it, the Tooth Taxi staff offered to provide the treatment after school.

"That just made a huge difference and had such an impact," Olivia says. "So, as much as we think about families without dental insurance, it also helps those with insurance because a lot of times dental insurance doesn't cover everything."

Olivia notes research shows that one of the leading causes of absences among schoolchildren is dental pain. Dental pain also is a major distraction for children while they are in school. Since the Tooth Taxi's visits Olivia has seen firsthand the impact of its services, which include improved attendance and classroom participation.

"I've seen kids who are actually happier. I've seen kids who are more on task. I've seen parents who are grateful for the support and the help, and the kids are excited to go to the Tooth Taxi. I was never excited to go to the dentist when I was a kid, but they love having the Tooth Taxi here and the teachers do, too," she says.

Olivia says outreach to parents has been essential in building a successful collaboration to care for the students. "Initially it was a lot of education about what the Tooth Taxi is. It involved letting parents know that it's not just a program to talk about oral health or a screening, but that they really could provide services."



The school partnered with Marquita and Community Health Centers Lane County to conduct an initial screening so a list of students would be ready for the Tooth Taxi's first visit. The school let parents know about the Tooth Taxi's visits through its website, fliers, its reader board and phone calls. Olivia and other school staff also worked with parents to complete the necessary paperwork.

"It definitely takes a lot of effort on the school's part to communicate and do the outreach with parents," Olivia says, adding she alone dedicated about 20 hours to recruiting. "That was well worth anything when you see how it pays off. I would do 200 hours if I knew it was going to pay off that way."

Carrie Peterson, the Tooth Taxi's program manager, says the commitment of Olivia and other school staff, as well as engaged parents and volunteers, are among the qualities that make Veneta Elementary a model site for the Tooth Taxi. She also notes the high number of students who received oral hygiene presentations in the classroom from Tooth Taxi assistant Catherine Johnson.



"This is far more participation than usual and I feel it really helps the students engage with our message about the importance of oral health not only while we're at the school, but it also gives them the knowledge to have conversations at home regarding what they've learned," Carrie says.

Lisa Mahoney, office manager and program coordinator for OEA Choice Trust, works with Carrie and Holly Spruance on scheduling the Tooth Taxi's visits. She travels throughout the state to help sites prepare for the Tooth Taxi's arrival and says she is impressed by Veneta Elementary's dedication to ensuring all the necessary paperwork from parents is completed.

Holly, executive director of OEA Choice Trust, highlights the work of people like Marquita, who helped introduce the school to the Tooth Taxi and paved the way for the successful partnership.

"It's that community person like Marquita who is a huge help to us because we don't always know there is a need," Holly says.



To find out about how your school can partner with the Tooth Taxi contact:
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The Tooth Taxi was created through a unique partnership with

