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Bel Alton dental clinic gets boost from state grant

In-school screenings at Title I locations could begin next month

By JEFF NEWMAN
Staff writer

Community leaders, health officials and a state senator gathered Monday morning at the renovated Bel Alton High School to announce a two-year, \$250,000 state grant that will help support a pediatric dental clinic for low-income children at the school.

During its first year, the grant will pay for dental screenings and oral health education at Charles County's Title I elementary schools. The program will expand to Calvert and St. Mary's counties in its second year, though elementary schools in those counties will receive some oral health educational materials during the first year.

Children found to be in need of dental services or a "dental home" will be referred to the organization's dental clinic, currently under construction at the old school, which has been turned into a community center. The grant will be used to hire a dentist, dental hygienist and support staff for the clinic.

"There is a great need in the community for dental care for children," said Joan Jones, president of the Bel Alton High School Alumni Association Community Development Corp., a nonprofit established by the school's alumni to help low-income individuals and families improve their quality of life. It operates out of the former school.

The grant is one of 15 totaling \$2.5 million awarded by the Community Health Resources Commission for fiscal 2012 and 2013 to expand primary care access in underserved areas of the state, reduce infant mortality, increase access to dental care for low-income children, promote access to behavioral health treatment services and assist providers in adopting health information technology, according to a commission release.

Since its creation in 2005, the commission has awarded 20 grants totaling \$4.2 million to expand dental services in the state, which collectively have provided more than 80,000 dental visits to more than 34,000 low-income residents, the release states.

Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton (D-Charles), who sponsored legislation creating the commission in 2005, praised the Bel Alton project.

"This grant from the commission will expand access to oral health services for underserved children. ... We are very grateful for this important investment," Middleton said.

"This is a 'wow' moment," said Edith J. Patterson, director of the College of Southern Maryland's Educational Talent Search, which helps people between 11 and 27 complete their high school education and enroll in college.

Initially planned for the building's basement, the clinic was relocated to the ground floor after rainfall from Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee left the basement under two feet of flooding, Jones said.

Space for the clinic already has been built thanks to a \$247,500 federal grant, 80 percent of which is for dental equipment. The clinic will house one panoramic X-ray machine and begin with two dental chairs, but plumbing for four chairs will be installed to accommodate future expansion.

Screenings could begin in county schools next month, Jones said. Two local dentists have volunteered to help children who need treatment before the clinic is up and running in a couple of months, she added.

Jones said the goal is to operate the clinic much like a regular dental office, generating profits while offering more affordable

treatments.

Charles County Deputy Health Officer Faye Reed said the project has potential similar to the dental clinic established by the county health department more than four years ago. Currently staffed by one full-time and two part-time dentists, a part-time dental hygienist and three full-time dental assistants, the clinic provided services to 2,600 children and more than 1,000 adults in fiscal 2011, she said.

“All of us working together will ensure our children have healthy teeth and wide smiles,” Reed said.

The grant also will pay for program outreach, transportation to treatments and, depending on a family’s ability to pay, some dental visits, Jones said.

The project is still accepting volunteer partners, Patterson said.

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Submitted photo Community leaders, health officials and state Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton posed for a group photo during an event Monday announcing a \$250,000 state grant for a new dental clinic at the renovated Bel Alton High School.

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Photo by Thomas Middleton, announcing a \$250,000

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Submitted photo State Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton praised the establishment of a dental clinic at the renovated Bel Alton High School during an event Monday announcing \$250,000 in state funding for the project.

education at Charles County's Title I

Photo by Thomas Middleton, announcing a \$250,000

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