



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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A Lot to Smile About... Mobile Program Serves its 10,000th Child

Pierre, SD (November 3, 2009) - This week, the Dakota Smiles Mobile Dental Program provided dental care to its 10,000th child. Since 2004, the mobile program has traveled to 60 different communities across South Dakota providing more than \$4.3 million of dental care to underserved children.

For many families, dental care is out of reach. Untreated toothaches and cavities can lead to unbearable pain and prevent children from leading healthy lives. Operated by Delta Dental of South Dakota, the Dakota Smiles program was started to help those children most in need of care.

“When we started, we knew there was a need,” says Carrie Mikkonen, the Dakota Smiles program manager. “What we didn’t realize was the extent of that need. Every week we see children who are in pain and need significant dental care. The good news is that we’ve been able to see thousands of kids and not only complete their care, but also educate them on how to care for their teeth and the importance of a healthy mouth.”

The program started with one vehicle, the Ronald McDonald® Care Mobile, and a full time staff of four. Today, the program, which added a second vehicle in 2008--the Delta Dental Smile Mobile--employs 10 full time staff, including a dentist, and continues to rely on volunteer dental professionals to reach more children. The schedule for both vehicles is booked nearly full through 2010.

The program provides preventive and restorative dental work for children ages 0-21 who do not have a regular dental home, have not seen a dentist for two years, or who have to travel 85 miles or more to see a dentist. No child is turned away for inability to pay.

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Delta Dental operates the program and funds a majority of the costs, but many partners have contributed to the program's success. The South Dakota Department of Health, Ronald McDonald House Charities and the South Dakota McDonald's restaurant owners have been partners since the program's inception. Many other donors and foundations have helped the program grow. The dental community has also contributed since the beginning. Collectively, 218 dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistants have provided 3,952 hours of care.

Local site partners, including service clubs, local churches, schools, Head Start agencies, social service agencies and rural community health clinics help bring the program to their community so their children in need can receive care.

“This program is invaluable to many families in our area. In our part of the state, there are only a couple of dental offices within 100 miles. Many parents don't get paid when they take time off work, and getting their child to an appointment means a day without pay,” says Pam Locken, CEO of Prairie Community Health in northwest South Dakota.

“It's hard to believe we've seen 10,000 kids,” says Mikkonen. “Our staff works extremely hard, but we are constantly rewarded when, for example, a child comes to us with a hug and says ‘thanks for fixing my teeth, my mouth didn't hurt last night’.”

Delta Dental of South Dakota is an oral health company specializing in providing dental benefits programs to more than 1,600 employer groups throughout South Dakota. Through its supporting 501(c)(3) foundation, the Delta Dental Philanthropic Fund, the company supports a number of oral health causes as part of its not-for-profit mission to advance and promote the improvement of oral health in South Dakota.