

Free dental screenings for kids at Southwest Dental Clinic

By Dahlia Ghabour

Correspondent

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The Southwest Dental Clinic at 816 SW 64th Terrace will chomp down on dental health today with an event to celebrate its first six months of service.

Free children's dental screenings and a community dinner are being offered at the Southwest Advocacy Group Family Resource Center across from the clinic.

The clinic, funded by a \$1.85 million grant from United Health Foundation, opened last July and has provided dental care for more than 1,500 patients, including over 175 children.

"By all measures, it's really taking off," said Michael Lawton, CEO of UnitedHealthCare Community Plan of Florida. "This is a great opportunity to keep momentum going with respect to the clinic and make sure people know it's there."

The free screenings will begin at 4:30 p.m. and run until 6:30 p.m., with dinner being served at 5 p.m. UnitedHealthcare mascot Dr. Health E Hound will conduct tours of the dental clinic, where families can ask questions and learn about the importance of oral health. Attendees will also receive gift bags that include dental care kits.

Bogdan Ivanov, the dentist at Southwest Dental Clinic, said many of his patients have anxiety due to previous traumatic experience with a dentist or uncertainty about procedures. His job includes putting them at ease, so they can receive often much-needed treatment.

"The most rewarding thing about working here is that almost every procedure I perform is urgently needed," Ivanov wrote in an email. "Many patients come to see us on a walk-in basis for emergency care and the service they most often receive is a tooth extraction."

As part of National Children's Dental Health Month, the clinic is offering tips to the community as well.

"We try to encourage regular oral health, and a way to think about that is the two-two-two rule," said Lawton. "Visit the dentist two times a year and brush your teeth twice a day, for two minutes at a time."

It's a technique Lawton has used when teaching his own daughter how to care for her teeth.

Even children with only one tooth should be getting screened, he said, and they should not be given bottles of milk or juice at bedtime because the sugars from the drinks will just sit in their mouths all night.

John Michael Gonzales of the Florida Department of Health in Alachua County also stresses the importance of dental health.

“Tooth decay is the most chronic disease kids can have,” Gonzales said. “If you brush and floss and go to the dentist, you can prevent it. Two of those things are pretty achievable but not everyone can always get to the dentist. That’s why we started this clinic on free and sliding-scale fees, so everyone can afford it.”

The clinic is hoping to screen 200 children Thursday. Ivanov said one goal is reaching out to more children for preventative dental care.

“By treating tooth decay and other dental problems in children we can put them on the right track for a lifetime of appropriate dental care and home oral hygiene,” Ivanov said. “This event will allow us to recruit a greater number of children as our patients and to remind parents that dental health is one of the most important health aspects for their children.”

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