Mobile Dental Units for School-Based Dental Care

Summary:
Gaston Family Health Services (GFHS) in North Carolina has established a robust school-based dental program utilizing mobile dental units. The school-based dental program was developed because GFHS found that 12,000 kids in the area had not seen a dentist in the last year. The program started in 2007 serving 250 kids in Head Start. In 2007, the only services provided included dental screenings and transporting kids to the GFHS dental clinics. The program continued to grow, leading to a portable dental unit in a school in Statesville in 2009. In 2017, GFHS added a mobile dental unit to serve as their school-based dental program for various counties including Catawba, Statesville, and Davidson.

The GFHS mobile dental unit is unique because it has three dental chairs instead of two. GFHS used the 2016 HRSA Oral Health Service Expansion funding along with local partnerships to create the mobile dental unit. The mobile dental unit took one year to build. GFHS opted to utilize a mobile dental unit because of the ease of set up. The mobile dental unit allows the providers to begin dental care with minimal set up, unlike some portable dental programs. The mobile dental unit is staffed by one dentist and three dental assistants. Dental services are offered throughout the year, depending on each school’s schedule and availability. Operating hours for the mobile dental unit vary, but is typically 7:30 am to 2:00 pm. The mobile unit runs five days a week, seeing about 22 patients a day. The dentist mostly sees children in fifth grade and under.

The mobile dental unit is equipped with a panoramic x-ray unit and a NOMAD portable x-ray unit. The dentist currently only provides preventive and diagnostic services. GFHS has found it difficult to provide restorative care on the mobile dental units because the children’s parents are not on site with them. Instead, patients are referred to the closest GFHS site. GFHS does not provide dental services to any school using their mobile dental unit that is more than 30 minutes away from a GFHS site. This allows the children and parents to access dental care at GFHS easily. GFHS has six fixed dental sites.

Referrals to the GFHS fixed sites are coordinated by a patient access navigator. The patient access navigator contacts the parents within 24 hours following the child’s dental visit in the mobile dental unit. The patient access navigator calls the parent to follow up on the child’s care and to schedule any additional appointments at the fixed site. GFHS has found that simply giving notes to the child is often insufficient because the notes often do not reach the parent, therefore follow up appointments for any restorative care can be missed. The patient access navigator also schedules the children for the mobile dental unit. Parental consent for dental care
is sent to parents through the school. Then the forms are returned to the school nurse who gives them to the patient access navigator. At that point, the children are scheduled for care.

When first starting the mobile dental unit school-based program, GFHS identified internal champions from the dental program and within the school. The dental director had to have conversations with the school board, principals, and superintendents in order to have the mobile dental unit at the schools. In one county, the oral health champion was a school nurse that agreed that oral health was an integral part of child health and wellness. The champions helped establish relationships with the schools and advocate for the need to have the mobile dental unit to provide dental care to students.

The GFHS school-based mobile dental unit is sustainable because of their staffing model and volume. The mobile dental unit has three dental chairs which allows the dentist to see as many patients as possible. In North Carolina, a dentist is required to be on site which adds to a high overhead cost. The three chair mobile dental unit helps offset some of that cost. The dentist has also been trained on workflows which allows for efficiency of the mobile dental unit. The program sees about 60% children with Medicaid, 20% uninsured, and 20% other insurance. GFHS credits the success of their mobile dental unit to their staffing model, having champions within the schools and dental program, and the use of the patient access navigator. GFHS plans on continued expansion of their school-based mobile dental unit. In 2018, GFHS saw about 4,000 kids across 56 schools. In 2019, GFHS is anticipating growth of 1,300 kids and adding 17 more schools.

Contact Person for Inquiries
William Donigan, DDS, MPH
Dental Director
991 West Hudson Boulevard
Gastonia, NC 28052
wdonigan@gfhs.info