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Clinic provides free dental, mental health care

BY KEN SAIN
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It's no secret the pandemic caused a lot of stress for and children were not immune.

Hygienists with the East Valley Community Dental Clinics noticed the problem last year and so they partnered with Southwest Behavioral and Health Services to address it.

The children's dental clinics in Chandler and Gilbert are screening patients from low-income families to see if they might benefit from some counseling with mental health professionals.

"Why this collaboration is starting was because we started seeing children with some health concerns, mental health concerns, that we were like, 'we have to do something about this,'" said Diana Westphal, the community oral health dental clinic supervisor for Dignity Health, which runs the two East Valley clinics.

She said that one of the reasons this partnership makes sense is that the financial burden is one hurdle that keeps low-income families from reaching out for help.

Becky Grudowski, program director with Southwest Behavioral and Health



The Chandler CARE Center provides free preventive dental care and mental health screenings to children in the Chandler Unified School District. The program includes, from left, Becky Grudowski, program director for Southwest Behavioral and Health Service and school-based program for the East Valley; Sharon Gillon AP, registered dental hygienist; and Diana Westphal, Dignity Health Children's Dental Clinic supervisor. (David Minton/Staff Photographer)

Services, said they received a grant to pay for mental health services for up to 10 children.

So far, about 30 children have been referred to mental health counselors for additional screening since the program began in February. Grudowski

said that many of those did not need professional counseling, and they still have funds available.

When a child from a low-income family shows up at one of the two clinics for dental care, they are screened. The parents of children younger than 12

are asked the questions to determine if additional screening is required.

Children who are 12 and older fill out their own screening form.

"And then we take a look at that, based on what we see, we might ask a follow up question or two to clarify," said Sharon Gilloon, one of the dental hygienists for Dignity Health. "And then we'll pass that off, we'll explain to them what would happen next, if they did indicate here that they wanted counseling or if they indicated some areas that they have trained us to look at as being critical areas."

Each hygienist received about four hours of training to help them screen the children they treat. Grudowski said there have always been some children who had mental health issues.

"It's something that's always been prevalent, but yes, I would say the pandemic has 100% increased the problems of mental health issues among adolescents and youth, specifically things like anxiety, depression and self-harm behaviors," Grudowski said. "We've seen an increase in those issues."

Both sides say the partnership has worked out well so far.

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"We started seeing some signs that created an awareness in our team, like, we have to do something to help these

families," Westphal said. "So that's how the whole idea came about, where we started searching for resources and navigating the system. And we learned that it was challenging to navigate the system to begin with."

Gilloon said she believes they are helping children who might not otherwise get the help they need.

"I honestly feel just privileged to be able to offer some services to the kids," she said. "I feel like it's definitely

needed, and the earlier the better in an individual's life. They can learn some skills to cope with some of the things we're seeing." 