Dental care on wheels keeps El Dorado youth healthy

By Jessie Marchesseau

The new pediatric dental office in El Dorado County is no ordinary dental office. The 42-foot-long van will have no permanent address. Instead, it will make its way to nine schools around the county each year.

This week it was parked outside the former Al Tahoe Elementary School in South Lake Tahoe.

Ana Salas, 24, learned of the program from her son's Early Head Start teacher. She brought her 2-year-old son, Luis, to the van for his first dental exam.

Dr. Celeste Eckerman examines Heidy Carrillo's teeth. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

"I think it's good," Salas said of the program. "It's his first time and I wanted him to see what it was like."

Though Luis only required a quick exam and fluoride application, not all the children who visit the van are so

fortunate. Dr. Celeste Eckerman estimates about 80 percent of the children they have seen had cavities. She attributes this to South Lake Tahoe having no fluoride in the water and a lack of education among parents.

Kristie Miser, a registered dental assistant on the van who worked in a pediatric dental office for the past seven years, explained many parents are under the impression baby teeth are not important because they eventually fall out. However, healthy baby teeth are essential for smiling, eating, speech development and maintaining space for proper alignment of adult teeth.

While oral health for children is the main focus of the dental van, it also provides dental care for expectant mothers with Medi-Cal.

As Eckerman examined Heidy Carrillo, 16, who is nearly five months pregnant, she explained that cavities result in bacteria in the bloodstream. A mother-to-be with cavities is spreading bacteria to her baby.

Eckerman referred Carrillo to one of two local dentists who accept Medi-Cal. Before leaving the van, Carrillo said that she is going to have her cavities fixed.

“Having no cavities means a healthy baby,” she said.

The El Dorado Children’s Dental Van was unveiled in South Lake Tahoe on Oct. 25 after years of work and planning. The van will travel around El Dorado County, providing dental services to children 5 and younger with Medi-Cal insurance.

“We’re ready to help these kids that need it,” Miser said. “We’re excited.”

The van is a collaborative effort between First 5 El Dorado, Shingle Springs Tribal Health Program, El Dorado County Office of Education and the El Dorado County Health Services

Department.

“We’re just really excited about this,” Steven Thaxton, executive director of First 5 El Dorado said. “Oral health under the age of 5 is an important need and this is a really positive program to meet that need.”

The van was custom built and features state-of-the-art dental equipment, including three dental exam areas, a panoramic X-ray unit and cordless digital X-ray system. It is a full-service dental office providing cleanings, fillings and other preventative services.

The three-person dental van team is comprised of a dentist, Eckerman, and two registered dental assistants, Miser and Char Thompson. As a dentist with a family practice in South Lake Tahoe, Eckerman said she saw a huge need for dental care for the kids in the area and is looking forward to her new role in the community.

“I became a dentist so I could help people who couldn’t afford dental care, so this is my perfect opportunity,” she said.

First 5 El Dorado expects the van to serve about 2,000 children annually. The team said the response so far has been great, adding the El Dorado County Office of Education has done a good job of getting the word out to parents.

The El Dorado Children’s Dental Van is scheduled to return to South Lake Tahoe in April when it will be at Bijou Community School.

For more information, go online or call 800.388.8690. Appointments are necessary. Paperwork is sent home with eligible children when the van is in area.

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