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San Diego Dental Clinic for Homeless Veterans Set to Open this Summer

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Veterans often face difficulties in accessing dental benefits, which are much more limited than medical benefits, through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). In order to be eligible for VA dental benefits, a veteran must have a service-related dental disability, be a former prisoner of war or have service-related disabilities rated 100 percent or more.

Receiving dental care is even more problematic for the nation's homeless veterans, of which there are nearly 50,000 on any given night, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The reasons why are numerous and complex, but a large number of homeless or at-risk veterans live with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse, according to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.

There are more than 4,600 homeless or disadvantaged veterans in San Diego, according to Dr. Irvin Silverstein, director and advisor for the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Student-Run Free Dental Clinic.

Dr. Silverstein's pre-dental students and the San Diego County Dental Society are working with Veterans Village of San Diego to build a dental clinic there for homeless veterans. Veterans Village of San Diego is a full-service rehabilitation center.

"We find that many veterans who have PTSD or other problems when they return from service face deteriorating health and sometimes become homeless," said Dr. Silverstein. "Through this dental program, we have a way of helping them get back into society."

The new dental clinic is expected to open this summer at Veterans Village of San Diego, which provides medical care, rehabilitation and mental health services, substance abuse recovery, legal services, job training, food and housing for its 200 residents, according to Annabel Wulfhart, care coordinator for the San Diego County Dental Society. Homeless veterans may stay there for as long as two years while working toward full rehabilitation.

The San Diego Dental Health Foundation, which is the charitable arm of the county dental society, is in charge of fundraising and planning for the clinic. The dentists, who are members of the San Diego County Dental Society, will provide the volunteer dental work. UCSD pre-dental students will manage the administrative aspects of running the clinic, as well as screening for volunteer dentists.

“This is a good pipeline to let the students know at a young age about access-to-care issues and the importance of organized dentistry,” said Dr. Silverstein.

Veterans Village residents have already shown substantial progress in rehabilitation and job training, said Ms. Wulfhart, who noted that often the only roadblock to employment is their inability to smile during an interview.

“In many cases, these residents have spent months and sometimes years on the streets,” she said. “During that time they develop serious dental problems. Even after rehabilitation, if they go to a job interview and they’re missing teeth, they’re probably not going to be hired.”

Several members of the San Diego Dental Health Foundation’s board of directors have already provided needed dental services in their own offices for some residents of Veterans Village of San Diego.

To date, they’ve provided basic and major restorative services valued at \$100,000, according to Ms. Wulfhart. But providing pro bono care in private dental offices is not sustainable. The new clinic will allow volunteers to treat a much larger number of patients on an ongoing basis.

“We’re hoping that eventually we can expand this model to provide dental care to all veterans in the San Diego area,” she said.