



MDA Foundation Mission of Mercy: Transforming Lives, Relieving Pain

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Photos by Amy Donley

After a six-year hiatus, the MDA Foundation hosted this decade's first Mission of Mercy free dental clinic in Flint June 14-15, helping anyone who needed dental care obtain it without regard for insured status, income, or residency. And when the MOM clinic at Flint's Dort Financial Center closed its doors June 15 at about 6 p.m., 659 patients had received a total of 6,678 dental procedures, valued at \$1,156,285.

That represents a 30% increase in the value of treatment over the last MOM, which took place in 2018. Patients this year received an average of 10 procedures each.

The 120-chair dental clinic at the Dort Financial Center was set up by volunteers on June 13 and torn down June 16. People came from 35 counties in Michigan, with 454 of those patients residing in Genesee County. Four patients each hailed from Ohio and Wisconsin, three were from Indiana, and two journeyed from Minnesota.

Patients who wanted care took no chance of being left out. They waited in line overnight to ensure they'd be among the first to receive treatment the next day. MDA Foundation Vice President Cameron Elrod began chatting with those in line at 3 a.m. on June 14, welcoming them to the MOM and



Patients, most of whom live in Genesee County, line up before dawn to receive care.

explaining how their experience would unfold.

"People are outside, standing in line in the dark," Elrod said. "They're anxious. They don't know what to expect. I just visit with them one-on-one and explain how the MOM works and how they'll be cared for, and I could see their anxiety go down. Everyone had such a great attitude and there was really positive energy from the patients and the providers. It's something you have to experience."

Gratitude and joy

"It's a joyous thing," said MDA Foundation President Dr. Dan Peters, who aided in routing patients from medical and dental triage, imaging, and evaluation to the next step in their care. "The coolest part of the MOM is the graciousness of the patients and the joy they express about being able to get a lot of dentistry done. We have been able to perform comprehensive dentistry," he added.

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Dr. Mike Maihofer (right) instructs his radiology team.



Dr. Tara Meachum assists a waiting patient.



Dr. Jim Cantwil was one of the local volunteers, shown here with a patient.

“One patient had a cleaning, fillings, a root canal, and a crown,” Peters said. “Tomorrow, the patient is coming back for four extractions and a flipper. That’s about \$8,000 of dentistry for one patient. And that makes a profound impact on quality of life.”

Peters observed that many MOM patients had dental insurance, but still could not afford the treatments that needed to be done. “The maximum of dental insurance has not kept pace at all with the cost of dentistry,” Peters

said. “And dental care is expensive.”

Dr. Michel Booth, former chair of MDA Insurance & Financial Group, decided to help out at the MOM despite having been retired for a few years. “I was overwhelmed with good emotions from the MOM,” Booth said. “I hadn’t touched a handpiece since October 2021. The MOM confirmed what I had believed for the last 45 years: that I was created for this service. I missed the patients, their affirmations and thankfulness, and the intellectual

challenge that dentistry demands. After six root canals, I was not exhausted, frustrated, or burned out. Not worrying about payroll, insurance conundrums, and general management of the office surely has its benefits. And, working with the team that Dr. Steve Harris assembled was extremely rewarding.”

From the patients’ perspective, the MOM was transformative and deeply appreciated. For example, Grand Blanc resident Joel Jurosek told us, “I am really impressed; this place is wonderful. Jurosek came to the MOM because his wife and daughter both have medical conditions, and their care consumes all the family’s financial resources. Following his hygiene care, Jurosek had an infected tooth extracted. He was pleased that the procedure was pain-free and that he could keep any post-surgical discomfort under control with Tylenol.

Dani Johnson heard about the MOM by word-of-mouth. She was pleased that she could get her teeth cleaned and filled without a fee and without filling out paperwork to see if she qualified for free care. “It’s great that they’re coming out to do this,” Johnson said, “but it’s sad that in our country, we need to do it. Dental care is not considered as medical care, but



Patients await treatment. In all, 659 patients received 6,678 dental procedures at the MOM.



The Dort Center provided plenty of space for the large MOM clinic.

it's just as important as medical care. The sooner we can get that addressed the better. Most of the people here are working and they can't afford dental care."

Likewise, Rhonda Terrell and her mother, Amra Ussein, both received hygiene care and fillings. Neither were

insured, and were thrilled to find a place where care was friendly and free.

Everyone working at the MOM volunteered their time. Dr. Steve Harris, co-chair of the event, was responsible for ensuring that the various clinical department leads had what they need-



One of the 659 patients treated at the MOM.

ed to deliver care. He worked to ensure that plumbing, electrical, and other logistics were in place to support the operatories and dental equipment. "This is a great opportunity to serve the public of Flint with a collegial event for the dental community," Harris said. "The Foundation is giving the dental community an opportunity to give of themselves at a mission without having to travel overseas. We're taking care of the people in our own communities, and we've facilitated a place where everyone can give back."

To make MOM patients' experiences as stress-free as possible, a team of translators stood by to assist. Translator Lead Guadalupe Guerrero is a dental assistant. She said there were five translators working Friday and three on Saturday. Spanish, Arabic, and American Sign Language translators helped facilitate patient care, much to the relief of non-English-speaking care seekers.

"Patients are very thankful to have
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Examination in progress.

an interpreter available to explain everything as it happens, Guerro said. “You don’t want to have a delay when a procedure is being done. They need to know a shot is coming now, not after it’s been administered. I think the Hispanic community sometimes feels intimidated by events like this. They should be aware there are translators who are available, because ultimately, we want to serve as many people as possible.”

A very important part of the patients’ MOM experience is learning about where and how they can continue to receive free or reduced-cost dental and medical care. After treatment, patients received information to help guide them to the continued care they needed.

Ann Heler, executive director of the Free and Charitable Clinics of Michigan, attended the MOM and provided resources to anyone interested. She explained that there are now 71 free clinics in Michigan where no one is turned away due to inability to pay. Soon, two more clinics will be opening — one located in Inkster, and another in Saginaw. Last year, these clinics saw 7,000 individual patients and provided care during 100,000 visits. Several MDA Foundation-supported clin-



Care is a team effort — thanks to hundreds of dedicated volunteers.



Patient is shown before treatment with volunteer Dr. Kenneth Geiger and after treatment (right).



Patients came by car, bus — or wheelchairs.



Staff from Genesee Health provided welcome assistance at the MOM.

ics are included in the network of clinics that use volunteer providers.

Strong community support was key

The entire Flint community was supportive of the MOM effort. Hurley Medical Center stood ready as the emergency treatment provider for anyone who had a health crisis while at the MOM. Registered Nurse Tarnesa D. Martin is the patient resource and community advocate for Hurley. She served as the event's public health lead and helped create a welcoming atmosphere for community members attending the MOM. She also worked with the Genesee County Health Department to make flu, COVID-19 and HPV vaccines available.

"Our area is one of health disparities," Martin said. "I try to be involved with anything impacting our commu-

nity to help with health-related issues. This event will keep patients out of the ER for dental issues. I'm very excited for the opportunity to participate."

Foundation President Dan Peters said the Flint community has been amazing. For example, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation awarded a \$70,000 grant to the MDA Foundation to help fund the MOM. "That was amazing and so appreciated," Peters said. "We have also had so many in-kind donations: bus service to bring people to the site, MTAs to be on stand-by in case they're needed, and so many more. Flint has been so supportive." For a listing of supporters, see Pages 42-43.

Dr. Margaret Gingrich, a former MDA president, has never missed a MOM. She has served as assistant
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The clinic closed around noon on Saturday so that all patients could receive needed treatment.



A feeling of goodwill and optimism permeates a clinic such as a MOM, making both patients and providers feel good about themselves.

dental chair three times, local chair once, and was the co-chair for this year's event, along with Harris. She remarked on the flexibility of the volunteers and their willingness to help in any way. Pediatric dentists who were waiting to work on children were tapped to do restorations on adults and were happy to pitch in to meet the clinic's shifting needs.

"I had hoped for a longer line waiting to get into the MOM this morning," Gingrich said of the Saturday attendance. "But this means that people who came are able to get a lot of work done, and it's wonderful when we can provide them with more dental care." Gingrich was able to work with some of her own patients to utilize their dental benefits and supplement their care with free services from the MOM. One of her patients received two crowns, and another had 19 teeth extracted in her office, also receiving upper and lower dentures at the MOM.

"We take wonderful care of the MOM patients," Gingrich continued. "They get free prescriptions, their families who are waiting get free food while they're here. It's wonderful to give back at a local mission."

The local dental lead for the event, Dr. Denise Polk, cited the strong participation of local hygienists, assis-



Security team provided cheerful assistance while on-site.

tants, dentists, and community partners as well. "This is a well-oiled machine," she said. "There's so much activity and there are so many smiles. Patients are so appreciative, even though they're scared. It warms your heart."

Dr. Matt Turchi, executive director of the Genesee District Dental Society, also helped recruit volunteers. "It definitely is the MDA dentists doing this," he said. "MDA dentists are behind providing this service and there is quite a

bit of hardship at the local level."

Clearly, a vital part of the MOM's work depends on having state-of-the-art equipment available, as well as dental lab services on site. Dentists prepared CERAC crowns for patients, and Brighton's Ward Dental Lab brought in 12 people to fabricate flip-pers, repairs, dentures, and relines. The lab had prepared 18 dentures before the MOM for people whose dentists were coordinating patient care with their practices' services. Ward Dental Lab has participated in each of the five Missions of Mercy, and the MDA Foundation is deeply appreciative of Scott Ward's generosity and joyful giving.

Very special patients

Friends and relatives told several patients about the MOM. Many others learned of it by local news coverage Saturday or by social media posts. Community services agencies in Genesee County also helped spread the word.

MOM volunteers heard so many moving stories about needed care from patients attending. A few patients willingly shared their situations, but some requested the use of their first

Total Procedures by Type

Evaluations:	2,008
Imaging, including Nomads:	1,416
Preventive care	1,181
Oral surgeries:	1,116
Restorative treatment:	809
Prosthodontic treatment:	92
Endodontic treatment:	56
Prescriptions:	388

**Total value of dentistry:
(including prescriptions and anesthetics) \$1,156,285**

A very important part of the patients' MOM experience is learning about where and how they can continue to receive free or reduced-cost dental and medical care. After treatment, patients received information to help guide them to the continued care they needed.



Truck from America's Dentists Care Foundation provided some equipment.

names only. For example:

- "Grandpa" Joe Snider is a Flint school bus driver who is also a street musician, playing the cello to entertain passersby. At age 77, he had a baby tooth in the front of his mouth that finally fell out, leaving an unsight-

ly gap. When Grandpa Joe learned that the MOM was coming to Flint, he volunteered for set-up duties, and then entertained volunteers by playing the cello while they ate lunch and dinner. He received hygiene care and a flipper to fill his gap-toothed smile,

and he was ecstatic. He was especially happy that he could give back as well as receive care.

- Emanuel, an Amish man from Stanwood, learned about the MOM from neighbors, and joined several other members of his community to journey from his Big Rapids-area town to Flint to receive care. A 10-year-old restoration to a front tooth had failed, resulting in a missing tooth. He had oral surgery and was waiting to get his flipper. "I'm very happy with how things are going here," Emanuel said, adding, "There are a lot of good people in the world."

- Flint resident Sandra received a crown for her chipped front tooth, and received oral hygiene care. Denise, from Flushing, had several cavities filled and received oral hygiene. "I'm really impressed by this," she said, speaking of the MOM. "It's very efficient."

- Kerstin, from Grand Rapids, was one of the first 30 people in the door Saturday morning. She had her teeth

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Preparing another patient to exit the MOM after treatment.



The enthusiastic MOM volunteers were ready go each morning.



It's never too early to ensure good dental health.

The MDA Foundation thanks everyone who made this year's Mission of Mercy possible. Successful events like this are just another example of how caring our MDA family is.

cleaned and received restorations. Her cousin also attended, and underwent a couple of extractions, also receiving a partial denture. Her wedding is later this year, and she was excited to have a great smile for the event.

- Vincent, a partially disabled veteran, was also in line at 6 a.m. Saturday. He was happy that everything proceeded quickly so he could have his teeth cleaned, receive a couple of extractions, and get two flippers. Because he is not 100% disabled, the Veteran's Administration does not provide the much-needed dental care for him, Vincent explained. "The people here are adorable," he said. "They are all so helpful. I am so appreciative of being able to get this care for free!"

- A young man from Grand Blanc named Dante said he had no dental insurance and his dentist told him it would cost \$800 for an extraction, which he could not afford. The MOM allowed him to receive oral hygiene care and restorations, and he hoped he could also have the problematic tooth pulled. "Everyone here makes you feel welcome," Dante said. "I don't feel funny about being here and getting free care."

- Angel, from Flint, does a lot of public speaking at community organizations. She says most dentists' hours are not compatible with her schedule, and her most-recent dentist no longer accepts her insurance. She also said her insurance wouldn't pay for the crowns she needed, but she was get-

ting two crowns at the MOM. Angel said that having the dental work done would make her more comfortable in her public speaking role.

- Another patient, Gloria, said, “I’m so glad there is a program like this for people who need help. Some people here have high co-pays or no dental insurance and they are able to get the care here that they need. Some things dental insurance denies can be done here, like my two crowns.”

- Chad came to the MOM from south of Cadillac. “I’m getting two crowns here,” he said. “I already had the root canals done. The crowns are a real cost savings for me. I have dental insurance with a \$1,000 limit, which doesn’t go very far. This has been a real good experience to me and it’s a great service they’re providing to the people of Michigan. I hope they realize how much this means to people.”

- First-time volunteer patient escort Tiger Thomas, whose wife, Dr. Lori Thomas, worked in dental triage,

was “blown away” by his experience at the MOM. “What an awesome operation this is,” he said, as the sounds of dental drills whirled in the background. “It’s unbelievable how cool and gratifying it is to see what these dentists are doing for the people of this area. They are changing people’s lives with this care. All the patients I’ve been with are so grateful. They had such good attitudes and dispositions. The volunteers I’ve spoken with say they’ve had similar comments from patients. I am just so impressed.”

Looking to the future

The MDA Foundation Mission of Mercy and its charitable dentistry will be continued in two years, June 11-14, 2026, this time in Kalamazoo. Local leads have already volunteered to help coordinate the event. Dr. Catherine Nelson and her husband Derek Nelson, employed by Stryker in Kalamazoo, have stepped forward to help bring the Kalamazoo MOM to the community.

“I’m extremely optimistic the MOM tradition will continue into 2026,” Foundation President Peters said. “The fundraising for this event went extremely well. We budgeted \$347,000 and we raised over \$460,000, which is remarkable. The Flint community was amazing and so supportive. The MDA Foundation is having a great year. We’re giving away more money this year for grants and scholarships, and we did a MOM! I am extremely proud of the progress we have made and the impact we’re having.”

The MDA Foundation thanks everyone who made this year’s Mission of Mercy possible. Successful events like this are just another example of how caring our MDA family is. And, we appreciate the support of our colleagues in hygiene, dental assisting, and our lay volunteers as well. Everyone in Michigan dentistry can be proud of its continuing dedication and service to the public and to the advancement of oral health in our state. ●



Flint Mayor Neeley shakes hands with a MOM volunteer as MOM co-chair Dr. Margaret Gingrich looks on.



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