

Muskogee Phoenix

Mobile unit brings dental care to children across state

By Keith Purtell

Phoenix Staff Writer—

Priscila Gonzalez, 4, was at the dentist for the first time Friday morning. Despite all the strangers and the dental equipment, she was very calm and quiet. Her mother Maria Gonzalez, 25, brought Priscila to the free dental services setup in a medical van outside Muskogee County Head Start. “This is a big help to us,” Maria said, speaking through interpreter Liliانا Aspiazu, a teacher for Early Head Start. “She had complained of some pain whenever she ate candy.”

The Mobile Dental Care program is a service of the Oklahoma Dental Foundation (ODF). Director Cari Ogden said the specially equipped van is a new initiative that began in May. Originating out of Oklahoma City, Ogden and a certified dental assistant travel the entire state. “Some counties don’t have a dentist at all,” she said. “With dentists retiring and students not entering dental school, there are just not enough. Especially in rural areas.” Ogden said she recruits local dentists before visiting an area where children need help with dental care. Two Muskogee dentists who volunteered their time for the Head Start kids were Dr. Dennis Wiebel and Dr. Brad Hoopes.

The Mobile Dental Care van can treat up to 20 children per day, ages 3 through 20. Those getting care outside Muskogee County Head Start were uninsured. Priscila’s dentist — Brandon Rogers — normally works for Dr. Don Logue in Tahlequah and the Wilma P. Mankiller Health Center in Stilwell. Also representing Logue was dental assistant Kayla Hanson. Altogether, dental professionals donated approximately \$1,700 in services during the van’s one-day stay in Muskogee. Leslie Porter, director of the Muskogee County Head Start, said the children most in need of health care are often the same ones with the least access. Although agencies such as Head Start struggle to help, Head Start itself took a nationwide 1 percent funding cut this year. “We’re trying to sustain level funding at the same time we’re seeing an increasing number of families who don’t have access to medical coverage,” she said.

Muskogee County Head Start serves 389 preschool children ages 3 and 4. The Early Head Start program includes 48 infants and toddlers and 12 pregnant mothers. That program has a waiting list of 175.

Porter had high praise for both the ODF Mobile Dental Care program and the ongoing support of area dentists.

“Muskogee is a very giving community,” she said.

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Photos



Priscila Gonzalez, 4, shows off her winning smile and “goodie bags” after completing her first-ever treatment by a dentist. Priscila stayed calm throughout the entire visit. Phoenix Staff Writer



Volunteer dentist Brandon Rogers works to treat and seal a cavity that had been causing some pain for Priscila Gonzalez. Muskogee County Head Start hosted the Mobile Dental Care program Friday. Phoenix Staff Writer