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Vets Find Free Dental Care and More at CVTC
College hosts fifth annual Give Vets a Smile

Eau Claire, WI – With a dental practice in Tomah, Dr. Jarius Houston sees many veterans and active-duty military patients. While volunteering his services at Give Vets a Smile Day at Chippewa Valley Technical College Saturday, Nov. 2, Houston noted a common problem within that patient group.

"Teeth grinding," Houston said. "They're not getting much sleep, and they're working hard. A lot of the young men grind their teeth really hard. They grind their teeth in their sleep. We're having them fitted for mouth guards to wear at night."

To give back to the people who have given so much while facing high stress, CVTC has hosted Give Vets a Smile Day since 2015.

The event offers free dental care to veterans, who do not have dental care as part of the regular veterans' benefits, unless the problem is service-related. Approximately 75 veterans are served each year by local dentists, hygienists, dental assistants, and CVTC students and faculty volunteering their time.

Over the years, a broad range of services have been added for the veterans, including COPD screening from volunteer local respiratory therapists and CVTC Respiratory Therapy program students, heart disease and diabetes education from CVTC Nursing students, assistive device assessments and recommendations from Physical Therapist Assistant students, a haircut from Cosmetology program students and physical therapist evaluations.

"In dental care, we're providing a myriad of services, like cleanings, exams, fillings, extractions, and minor denture repair," said Dr. Randy Shook, an Eau Claire dentist from Regis Court Dental and himself an Air Force veteran. "It's more basic care, where they have dental pain or a broken off tooth."

"I have a tooth that's chipped, and they're going to fix that," said 1969-71 U.S. Army veteran Steve Prince, who lives in the Lake Wissota area. "I lost my dental insurance when I retired in 2013. Now this is the only time I see a dentist. I've probably been here every year."

Prince, who grew up in Jim Falls, added that he had a chipped tooth fixed last year as well.

"I heard about this through the American Legion and I needed some dental work done, but I couldn't afford it," said Russell Wozniak of Bloomer, who served in the U.S. Army from 1979-82. "It's probably been a year to a year-and-a-half since I've seen a dentist. I only go when I've got some issues that need to be fixed."

Wozniak noted that he called for an appointment as soon as he heard about the opportunity, but had to be put on the waiting list. He was pleased to get a call the night before and was told an appointment time had opened for him.

"I'm hoping to get some X-rays and a check-up," Wozniak said. "I have a couple of pains."

Robert Taylor of Eau Galle, who served in the Air Force from 1963-83, told a story similar to the experience of other veterans who have had no dental insurance. "I once needed some work done, but they wanted $1,500. I couldn't afford it," he said.

Give Vets a Smile Day has many repeat patients, and for some the once-a-year visit is all the dental care they receive. Taylor came last year.

"They pulled a couple of teeth for me," he said. "One was broken off at the gum line."

"We wanted to provide better services for the veterans and also provide interdisciplinary experiences for our students," said Donald Raymond, the Respiratory Therapy program director at CVTC, about the extra services available. "We've involved students from Heath Information Management Technology (HIMT), Associate Degree Nursing, Dental Assistant, Dental Hygienist, Respiratory Therapy, Barber-Cosmetology, and Physical Therapy Assistant.

"Many local dentists, hygienists who are graduates of our program or work with local dentists, plus our Dental Hygienist program students all volunteer their time to serve the veterans who served us," said Pam Entorf, CVTC Dental Hygienist and Dental Assistant instructor who started the program.

With over 155 programs offered both online and on-campus, Chippewa Valley Technical College delivers superior, progressive technical education which improves the lives of students, meets the workforce needs of the region, and strengthens the community. CVTC programs are designed with input of business and industry to prepare graduates for today's jobs, with 95 percent employed within six months of graduation and associate degree graduates earning an average annual salary of $46,816.

CF Photo
Matt Rindahl, a dental hygienist with the Houston Dental Clinic in Tomah, prepares to help Army veteran Steve Prince of Chippewa Falls at the Give Vets a Smile Day event at the CVTC Dental Clinic Nov. 2. Rindahl, a 2016 CVTC Dental Hygienist program graduate is a Navy veteran.

Bloomer photo 1

CVTC Dental Hygienist program student Aimee Stauber of Baldwin performs an oral cancer screening on Army veteran Russell Wozniak of Bloomer at the start of his exam at the annual Give Vet a Smile Day event at Chippewa Valley Technical College Saturday, Nov. 2.

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