

Dientes Celebrates 6 Years in Watsonville, Hopes to Continue Growth

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POSTED ON AUGUST 5, 2021

Dr. Sepi Taghvaei clearly remembers one of her favorite patients at Dientes Community Dental Care.

The woman had all her upper teeth removed while serving time in prison. Since the facility hadn't offered dental care, her teeth had slowly decayed.

Dientes set the patient up with an upper denture, and began helping her with increasing her oral health. Now a social worker, she refers and brings in her own patients to the clinic, said Taghvaei, the chief dental officer at Dientes.

“Every time we see each other, she gives me a hug,” she said. “There are so many examples like this—it’s just so rewarding, working in this clinic.”

This week marked the sixth anniversary of Dientes Community Dental Care’s facility in Watsonville. First established in 2015 as an oral health care clinic for homeless adults, it has continued to grow, now serving a variety of different patients of all ages.

The bilingual clinic provides low-cost preventative care for low-income families, as well as treatments such as root canals, crowns and dentures. Dientes aims to promote the importance of oral health, especially through its Outreach Days at local schools.

“The mouth is the gateway to your body,” Taghvaei said. “If you have issues in your mouth, it can affect your overall health.”

Taghvaei noted the two-way correlation between oral health and diabetes, as well as poor birth outcomes, cardiovascular disease and more.

“Not to mention ... you need your teeth to eat, for nutrition, to speak. It’s huge,” she said.

The Watsonville center shares a space with a medical clinic from the County of Santa Cruz, which is unique but beneficial to both parties, said Dientes’ Chief Development Officer Sheree Storm.

“We’re really grateful for this partnership,” she said. “We see their patients, and vice versa. Having that integration of medical and dental health is so important.”



COMMUNITY CARE *Helen Arvidson, a patient at Dientes' clinic in Watsonville, receives a checkup Tuesday. PHOTO: Johanna Miller/The Pajaronian*

Dientes' main clinic is located on Commercial Way in Santa Cruz, with additional clinics in the Beach Flats area and at the Housing Matters campus on Coral Street. The need for a center in South County was apparent as demand grew over the years, said Clinic Manager Yari Alvarado.

"The need here is so high," Alvarado said. "Currently we have such a high demand ... We don't have the capacity to see everyone at this location. We're constantly receiving calls."

The clinic opened with room for four chairs and limited equipment. In January they added a fifth chair and expanded services, adding additional tools such as a panoramic X-ray machine, which was donated by Dignity Health.

Under Covid-19 restrictions, they serve about 34 patients a day, at about 85% capacity.

"We have hopes and dreams ... the county knows how big the need is, how many calls we have to say, 'No, we don't have space,'" Storm said. "We could double our patient count and still not address the whole need. We'll see where things go, but hopefully, fingers crossed, we can grow."

On Tuesday, Storm, Taghvaei and Alvarado, along with doctors Catherine Modieski and Vicki Lowell, gave a press tour of the small yet bustling clinic. They had originally planned for a five-year anniversary celebration in 2020, but that was canceled due to the pandemic.

"We wish we could have celebrated five years ... but as we know, the world changed," Storm said.

Patient Helen Arvidson was being treated Tuesday, with daughter Beth Bigger at her side. Bigger said that her mother, who now lives at Watsonville Post Acute Center, was first referred to Dientes by a doctor in Los Gatos.

"We're so happy we found this place," she said. "It's wonderful."

Taghvaei said she was “super grateful” to work at the clinic, and praised her fellow staff for their dedication.

“Staff at this clinic are superstars,” she said. “They’re so on top of it, so compassionate. When a patient walks in, they know them by name. It’s been a pleasure and an honor to serve this community, who really needs us.”

For information about Dientes, including upcoming Outreach Days, campaigns, and updates about the new health campus at 1500 Capitola Road that they are building with Santa Cruz Community Health and MidPen Housing, visit dientes.org.

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