

In The Fields.

Teresa Bonny knows she could make more money and work in a more comfortable environment elsewhere, but money and job perks are not why she came to the Yakima Valley Farm Works Clinic.

A dental and medical care facility in south-central Washington for low-income, migrant and seasonal farmworkers, the clinic for 20 years has provided treatment for those most needing help and the least able to afford it.

WASHINGTON: NOT FOR EVERYBODY

"It is just a different working environment that I like," said Bonny, a registered dental hygienist who has worked at the clinic five years. "I am sure that it is not for everybody."

Funded through state and federal grants and through private fees, the clinic is like many throughout the country set up to treat the 3.5 million nomad farmworkers who prepare the land, hoe, weed and harvest fruit and vegetable crops that feed America. Patients pay on a sliding fee scale.

Bonny worked in private practice for two years after graduating from school in Montana. Although she speaks little Spanish and the majority of her patients speak Spanish only, the language barrier doesn't prevent her from being effective in her job or from enjoying it.

"I basically stay here because I get a chance to do a lot of education — educating pregnant mothers on baby bottle tooth decay and doing some surveys on children's teeth, things like that. I enjoy it so because I just feel there is such a great need for it," she

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By Tom Witherspoon

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The clinic advertises for customers on Hispanic radio stations and has four satellite offices in Washington state.

While the clinic specializes in basic primary care and education for the poorest of America's working poor, the two full-time and one part-time dentists and Bonny also provide emergency care to the workers and their families.

TEXAS: GRANTS FOR DENTAL CARE

In 1962, Congress passed the Migrant Health Act, which funded grants to agencies to provide medical and dental services to agricultural migrant workers and their families.

Dr. Ramon Baez, an assistant professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio, administers just such a grant to patients in one of the nation's poorest regions, the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas.

Baez, co-president of the U.S./Mexico Border Health Association, has provided free treatment to more than 1,600 patients since January 1990 with the help of a \$50,000 grant from the Texas Department of Health.

Armed with dental instruments and driving his trusty mobile dental office, Baez fights rampant tooth decay and gum problems along the Texas-Mexico border.

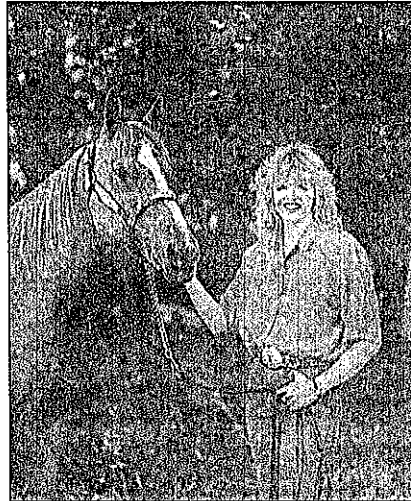
"Now that I have been there and seen the mouths of the kids, I can see that we need to continue this work, especially for the kids," said Baez, a Colombian American. "We have seen a great need there."

The poverty level in the region hovers at 51 percent, Baez says, compared to an 18 percent statewide average. Dental care proves to be a luxury among the poor workers, whose annual income for a family of six is estimated at about \$5,000.

"We felt at first that we were just providing a short-term solution to the problem, so we decided to provide more comprehensive dental care by visiting the same places again and following up with school nurses," Baez said.

"The school districts have played a very, very important role in the development of our program, and school nurses are the key person. Invariably, when I follow-up to see if they have been taken to a dentist, we find out that they have not been taken to a dentist," he said.

Baez said he lets school officials know when he will be driving into town with his mobile dental office and they schedule appointments for the students with



Stephen K. Wolfe

him.

"When we are in our treatment phase, we average 12 hours of work a day," he said.

For Baez, however, the new and improved smiles on the faces of the children he sees makes the hard work and effort worth it.

"One girl, I think she was 7-years-old, came in and her front teeth were all decayed. We restored here teeth, every one, and took photographs. She couldn't believe how she looked. She is a very, very happy girl now," Baez said.

While hygienists are not part of the program now, Baez said he hopes to work out a schedule with the UT Health Science Center dental hygiene program to rotate out students to make trips to the border with him and three other dentists.

COLORADO: REACHING OUT TO PATIENTS

In Colorado, 26 of the state's 62 counties play host to about 17,000 migrant farmworkers and their families each year. Their stay in Colorado communities varies from several weeks to several months, depending on the labor force needs of individual crops.

Assisted by a \$1 million annual grant, the Colorado Migrant Health Program uses a number of methods to reach migrant workers and their families across the state.

Diane Covington, RDH and dental coordinator for the CMHP in Denver, said her agency contracts with local health organizations and has agreements with more than 200 private physicians, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, optometrists and dental hygienists to provide treatment to migrant families.

The CMHP also maintains close

working relationships with other agencies and programs serving migrants to avoid duplication of services, she said.

"Dental treatment is the number one need of the migrant farm worker," Covington said. "Not only do we find, based on our exams of the clientele, that it is their number one need, but they tell us that their number one perceived need is dental treatment."

The program is designed to provide treatment to the workers who not only have to cope with low wages and poor health conditions in general, but sometimes inadequate nutrition, cultural isolation and community discrimination.

Less than 2 percent of Colorado health-care providers speak Spanish and migrants frequently do not qualify for services because of residence requirements. The workers also seldom have time to seek dental treatment during regular working hours because they work long hours and can't afford to take off during the day.

It is Covington's and the CMHP's duty to try to help the workers overcome these burdens to get the treatment they need, she said.

"When you barely have the ability to put food on the table, health care, and particularly dental care, get put on the back shelf," Covington said, "In other words, it is a luxury instead of a necessity."

Delivering dental services to this special population has become a cooperative effort between the CMHP, dental and hygienists schools and private dentists and hygienists.

Each year, seasonal dental professionals are hired and placed in rural communities. Eighteen to 20 dental hygienists are employed following a national recruitment effort. They come to Colorado at their own expense, take less-than-normal salaries and work long hours. But they love their work and the people they serve.

At the opening of each school year, all children receive health screening, which includes dental. Children are ranked by priority of need. Dental treatment is delivered by dental students in private offices, federally funded clinics and mobile vans.

Dental hygienists provide a dental prophylaxis, topical fluoride application and patient education for each child. Portable equipment, clinical supplies, toothbrush kits and education materials also are provided by the program. **ADH**

Tom Witherspoon is a freelance writer in Waco, Texas.