Protecting the uninsured

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By JUSTIN CARISSIMO Tribune Chronicle correspondent , Tribune Chronicle | TribToday.com

For the past two years, Dr. Jeffrey LaFuria has taken a weekend off from managing his dental office in Warren. When he's not pulling teeth or planning a new sleep apnea program, LaFuria takes the six-hour drive to Wise, Va., and exercises his dental skills in an unusual fashion.

In 2011, LaFuria received a phone call from his brother that left him interested in Remote Area Medical, a group offering free medical care to underinsured or uninsured Americans. LaFuria said after his first time volunteering it was a "no brainer" to continue offering his skills to RAM expeditions.

RAM started in 1985 as "small and very local," serving patients overseas under one airport hanger, according to director, Jean Brady Jolly, who manages and plans expeditions.

Article Photos

Warren dentist Dr. Jeffrey LaFuria, left, works on a patient in Wise, Va., as part of Remote Area Medical, a group offering free medical care to underinsured or uninsured Americans. Photos special to the Tribune Chronicle / Tim Cox

Volunteers traveled to international locations including Mexico, Guatemala, Guyana, Africa, and Haiti before RAM developed programs within the United States.

"We no longer go in broken down buses with only a few volunteers. In those first years, if we treated a hundred we thought we were doing wonderfully," Jolly said.

On July 19, the sky was pitch black as LaFuria drove into Wise County Fairgrounds for his second Mission of Mercy clinic. Arriving at 5 a.m., he was greeted by policemen directing long lines of traffic toward a jam-packed parking lot. LaFuria parked his vehicle, stepped in line, then immediately began treating his portion of the 2,292 registered patients.

"We went in through the side gate, checked in, I put on my little headlight, and right away, a guy hands me a bunch of folders and says, 'Check these people in,' and you just get to work," said LaFuria. He said he couldn't believe how many patients camped out to receive treatment.

"The two parts of our healthcare that people don't have access to are dental and eye. The people coming to RAM are not homeless, these are people with houses, jobs and skilled trades," said LaFuria.

Some 3,996 tooth extractions, 1,724 cavity fillings and 276 teeth cleanings were given over the weekend. RAM volunteers also performed root canals, eye exams, orthopedic mammograms, cancer screenings and offered patients general medicines. LaFuria joined approximately 1,396 other volunteers at the Wise event for what he describes as "a machine" of an impromptu medical clinic.

Another one of those volunteers was Ashley Elder, an anthropology student at the University of Virginia Concord. Elder works as an assistant at RAM headquarters, and for three years, she's travelled to Mission of Mercy clinics.

Elder helped by filing patient and volunteer registration forms and by cleaning medical equipment. Her favorite part of the weekend was seeing how excited the patients were after being treated. Each day, Elder, LaFuria and the rest of the volunteers worked from sunrise to 7 p.m.

Since 2000, RAM's success has lead to projects across America, aiding 51,311 citizens with $32 million in free dental care. Jolly said RAM aids patients in Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, California, Colorado, Oklahoma, Nevada, Illinois, Missouri and North Carolina.

The current health care system leaves more than 48 million Americans uninsured or underinsured. In Ohio, current legislation doesn't prohibit out-of-state medical practitioners to volunteer without compensation on a short-term basis, but LaFuria still hopes to attract an event, similar to the Mission of Mercy clinics for Ohioans.

"It would be nice to partner or work with doctors, executives, and get a program going like this in our area, even if it was on a small scale. We've got the fairgrounds down in Canfield, say we saw 500-1000 people, and then it grows. I've done it two years on my own, but I'm also ready to bring some of our local medical professionals down to Wise," said LaFuria.

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