Western Service Workers Association

CALIFORNIA SERVICE WORKER

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Preventive Dental Benefit Promotes Healthy Smiles!

New Volunteer Dentist Joins Non-Emergency Dental Benefit Staff

Last fall Western Service Workers Association's (WSWA) Benefit Coordinator Gabriela Chavez informed delegates of the Santa Cruz County Workers Benefit Council of the addition of Rachana Vyas, DDS to WSWA's preventive dental benefit team. Dr. Vyas began providing free-of-charge dental cleanings in July 2017 as part of the association's non-emergency dental benefit. Chavez said, "Dr. Vyas and other dentists, oral surgeons and dental labs have stepped up to the plate to provide much needed non-emergency dental care monthly in the face of severe cuts by the State and the County." Dr. Vyas held four preventive cleaning sessions in July, August and September of 2017 as well as in February 2018, seeing three to four members who requested this benefit at each session.

"There is a public health crisis," stated WSWA volunteer dental advocate Joyce Baker. "Having untreated dental problems can lead to higher blood pressure, gum disease, not to mention extreme pain." According to Salud Para La Gente, a non-profit organization that relies on federal funding and provides low-cost dental treatment in Santa Cruz County, there are over 50,000 Medi-Cal recipients in the County who do not have a dentist.

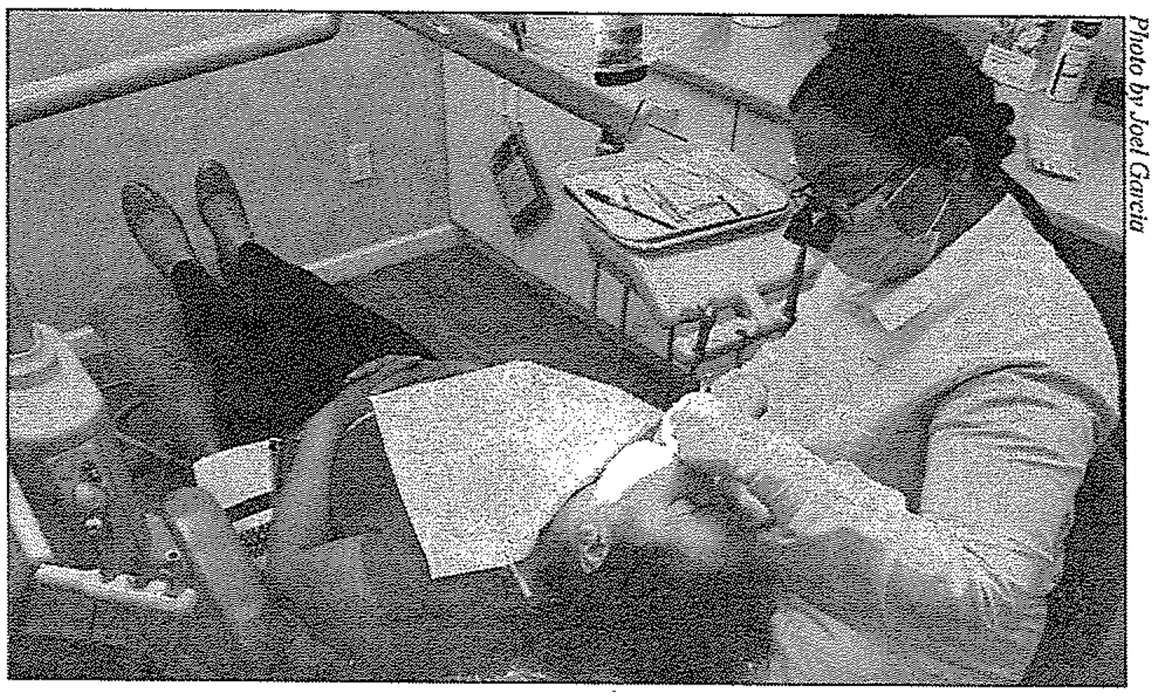

Photo by Joel Garcia

Dr. Rachana Vyas provided free-of-charge dental cleanings for four WSWA members on September 11, 2017 at her office in San Jose.

La Dra. Vyas vió a cuatro miembros para limpieza dental el 11 de septiembre de 2017 en su oficina en San José.

One WSWA member came to the association after eight years of not being able to pay to go to a dentist. In addition to having chipped a tooth, she had severe gum recession, two teeth that were loose and two infected teeth that needed root canal treatment. She needed deep cleaning on all four quadrants of her mouth, in addition to partial dentures for five missing teeth. Along with Glidewell Laboratories, Devin Bernhardt, DDS and the office of Nanette Benedict, DDS donated thousands of dollars of work to give her a healthy mouth. WSWA's non-emergency dental benefit is based on the principle that no

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Members Stop State Migrant Camp Early Closure

Attention All WSWA Members!

¡Atención a todos los miembros de la WSWA!

Dental Benefit

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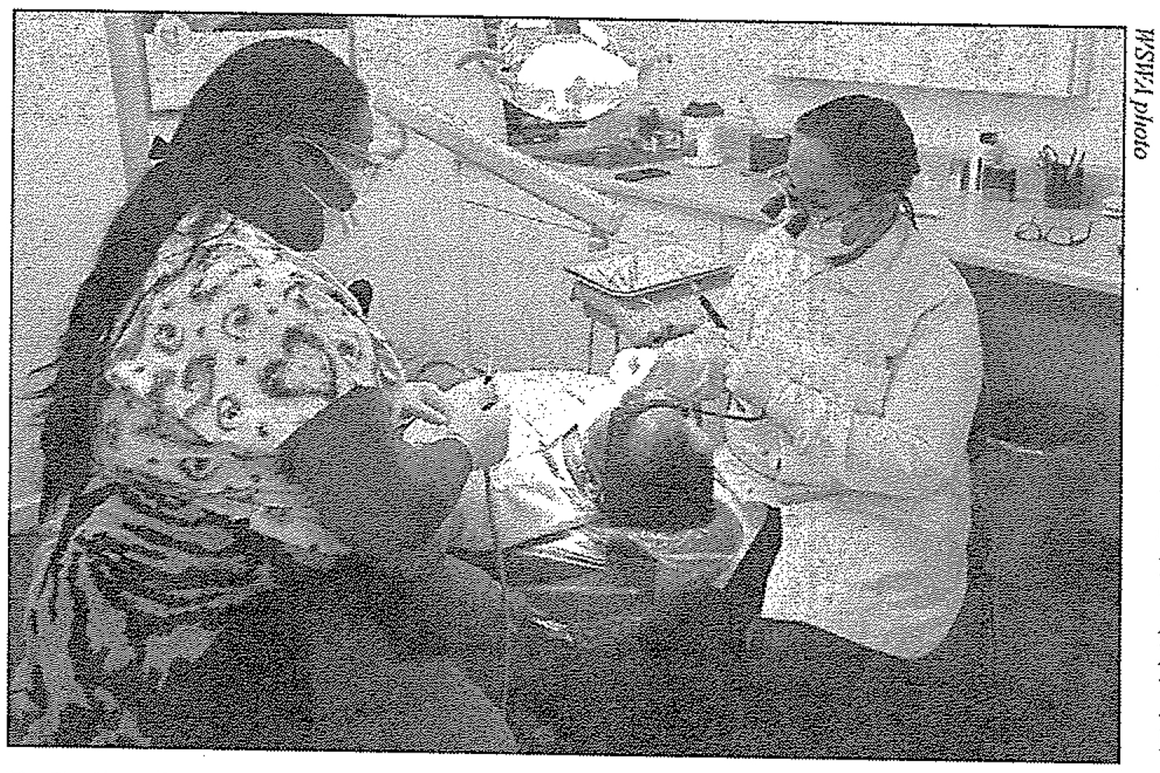
one should be denied access to best health care practices on the basis of their income.

Another member came to WSWA after she had been turned away by all of the low-income clinics in the County and she could not find a dentist who would treat her. She had suffered with an abscessed tooth for five months and was in extreme pain to the point where she could not function. She had just come from a low-cost dental clinic that had referred her to a specialist. The treatment she needed would have cost her $2,000 for a single tooth, which was far beyond her ability to pay.

WSWA volunteer Dr. Benedict referred her colleague, William C. Francis, DDS, an endodontist who generously agreed to see this member immediately. Dr. Francis recognized the urgency. "This is really serious, if she had gone any longer without seeing me the infection would have spread to the bone and into the blood stream." Dr. Francis performed a root canal treatment and prescribed antibiotics for the infection, and Westside Pharmacy donated the prescribed medications. Dr. Bernhardt then donated his professional services to carry out the rest of the treatment plan needed to resolve the problem.

Cases like these are just some of the examples of the need for WSWA's non-emergency dental benefit. General dental sessions held in private dental offices are an example of what can be accomplished by organizing to combat the devastating conditions that low-income workers face when struggling to survive on wages that don't meet expenses.

WSWA members have contacted dentists to donate their professional skills in regularly scheduled appointment blocks to treat WSWA members. These dentists welcome the opportunity to volunteer as part of a team effort that allows each professional to contribute their professional services to the extent that they are able, with the goal of developing a treatment plan to restore a tooth when possible, as opposed to carrying out the cheapest, most expedient practice of extracting the tooth.



WSWA photo

Dr. Rachana Vyas (right), assisted by Dental Assistant Evie Zepeda, provided a dental cleaning for one of four members on July 11, 2017 as part of WSWA's preventive dental benefit.

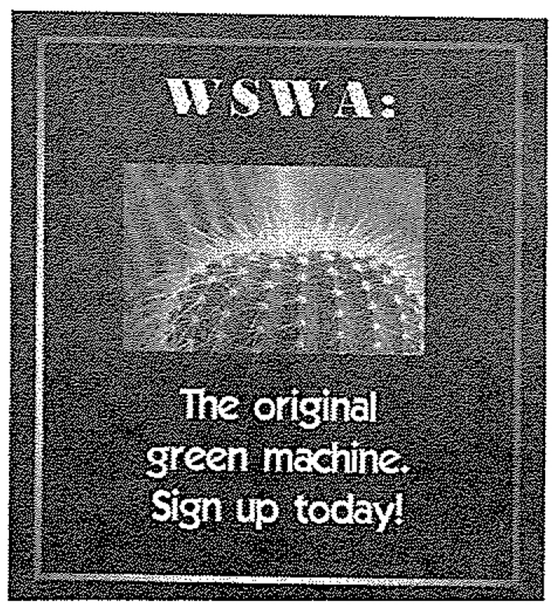
La Dra. Vyas (derecha) y su asistente Ivy haciendo limpieza dental para uno de los cuatro miembros vistos el 11 de julio de 2017 como parte de le benefico dental de WSWA.

"Our dental benefit makes it possible for a volunteer dentist to develop a treatment plan based on the best long-term interest of the patient, as opposed to limiting the patient's options to what they can afford," said Chavez. "Our free-of-charge dental benefit identifies all the obstacles to treatment, and we find ways that more volunteers can participate to overcome those obstacles."

For example, volunteers organize transportation to get a member to an appointment, recruit bi-lingual volunteers to accompany a member to communicate in the patient's native tongue, or procure a donation of dental lab services for dentures, partials and crowns. These are all part of the association's non-emergency dental benefit. Each step requires involvement of committed individuals who agree to carry out a plan and a schedule of volunteer participation to see a benefit case all the way through.

The high cost of living in Santa Cruz County, combined with minimal wage jobs with no benefits, lies at the heart of the dental crisis. According to the August 29, 2017 edition of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 70% of poor Californians spend half or more of their income on rent. In November, 2017 the Santa Cruz County Housing Authority cited Santa Cruz as the fourth least affordable place to live in the world.

On November 4, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reported that unemployment in the County is at a 17-year low. Chavez explained, "According to the 'law of supply and demand' wages should be going up; however, they are not. Most of the County's jobs pay $2 or less over minimum wage. A minimum wage worker, working full time in Santa Cruz, brings in $1,680 a month before taxes. That's nothing when you consider that average rent in Santa Cruz now stands at $2,900 per month. Add that to the cost of food, car



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