



"It's Everything": Riverbend Head Start Receives \$20,000 Donation for Kids' Dental Care

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - Riverbend Head Start & Family Services received a \$20,000 donation from Delta Dental to go toward dental care for their students.

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services provides early childhood education for income-eligible families. CEO Gene Howell noted that a lot of their work is funded by Head Start, a program through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. But Riverbend Head Start & Family Services also assists with health and dental care, which they must fund themselves. The Delta Dental donation will make it possible for them to help more children.

“If you can imagine a 3-year-old with three or four or five or six exposed nerve roots, that’s a lot of pain. You can’t learn when you come into a classroom in that kind of pain,” Howell said. “Delta Dental allows us to connect that kid with a local resource...It makes a world of difference for these kids. And when they come in after getting the surgery done, you see the smiles, and they’re tasting cold food and hot food. Their attitude, their demeanor is different. It’s everything.”

Howell said they spend \$150–180,000 a year on dental work for their kids. He added that they are usually \$70,000 over the budget because of that need, and they “cobble together resources from all over the place” to cover it.

The organization tries to connect families with local dental offices that will take Medicaid or work on a sliding scale. Most dental offices are booked months out, which is a long time to wait for kids who are in pain.

“Especially with these COVID babies coming up, those were the ones who have been stuck at home for three years. They’ve got some significant dental needs,” said Casey Cope, Health Specialist at Riverbend Head Start & Family Services. “On average, our kiddos who are needing that significant dental work, we’re sitting at about \$5,000 per each kid.”

[Miles of Smiles](#) holds two dental clinics a year at Riverbend Head Start. Most recently, they saw over 300 kids in one day, over half of whom needed some form of work. Cope added that one of their 4-year-olds had to have every tooth but one removed because they were all decayed, which caused a lot of pain and cost nearly \$10,000.

To avoid this, the Riverbend Head Start team tries to educate kids and parents about the importance of oral health, starting at the prenatal stage. The kids brush their teeth in the classrooms, and every kid gets toothpaste and an age-appropriate toothbrush. Lora Vitek, the executive director of the [Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation](#), said that Delta Dental will send more toothbrushes in addition to their donation.

“We want to continue to partner with you all as you continue to identify ,” she said. “However we can help more in the health arena, we’re happy to do it.”

A representative from the Office of Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski was present. Alton Mayor David Goins reflected on the story of the 4-year-old, which he called “heartbreaking.” He said he understands that it can be difficult to prioritize oral health, but he has lived by the motto “Ignore your teeth, they will go away,” since he was in college and learned this lesson firsthand after experiencing dental issues.

Howell noted that oral health is the top health issue they face at Riverbend Head Start. He added that most of the kids also become less self-conscious and let themselves smile more often after they receive dental care. Kristy Smiley, Disabilities and Child Health Coordinator, agreed and shared how excited she is to see the difference in the kids after they get the care they need.

“Seeing the work that is done through our grants and being able to get the services, they are able to come in and eat and be able to have the nutritious meals that they are getting with our program, and then learn and build their skills. Their language grows immensely, too, because the pain that they have whenever they’re speaking from the cold air or whatever goes away whenever they have that dental work,” Smiley said. “When our health advocates, our family advocates, our teaching teams identify these needs and then it gets taken care of, you can see the growth from when they first start with us to when they go on and transition to kindergarten. It’s great.”

For more information about Riverbend Head Start & Family Services, including how to [donate](#), visit their [official website at RiverbendFamilies.org](#).

