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Filling an Ever-Widening Gap in the Aftermath of COVID-19

Filling the Gap Dental Outreach is a new, not-for-profit start up that provides free dental care to working poor adults in Toronto

The COVID-19 outbreak in Canada has put a spotlight on economic inequalities that leave vulnerable communities to bear the economic brunt of the crisis. Thousands of low-income Torontonians are facing devastating job and wage losses, and the inability to pay essential bills. Many workers who previously had full-time contracts along with a benefits plan have lost valuable working hours and been moved to part-time status, thus losing their employee benefits. This has exacerbated a problem that had existed long before the outbreak of COVID-19.

According to the Metcalf Foundation, in 2016 there were almost 170,000 working poor individuals in the Toronto CMA. This figure has been increasing steadily, rising exponentially during the past few months due to the coronavirus pandemic. A recent report from the Wellesley Institute states that 45 per cent of Ontarians earning \$30,000 or less annually have no employer-provided health benefits and can't afford to visit a dentist, even for emergency care. These members of our community are falling between the cracks.

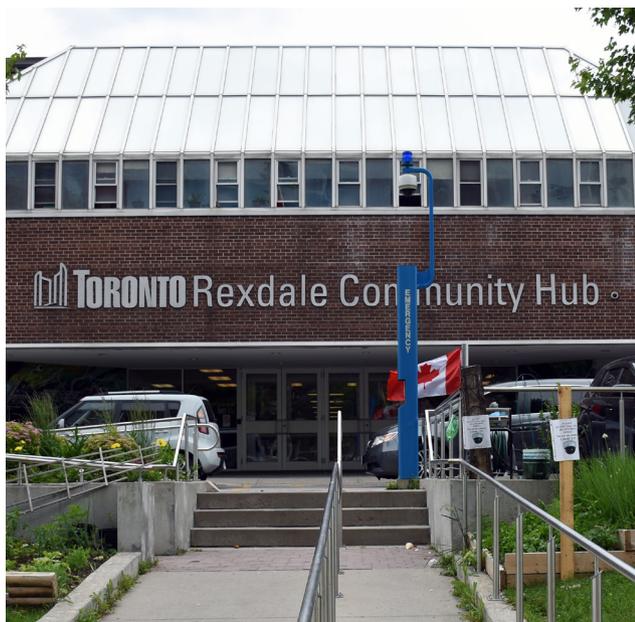
Other vulnerable groups in Ontario have basic dental coverage through provincial government programs. Children have access to the HSO program, seniors to the recently launched OSDCP and individuals who are unemployed, disabled or refugees to the OW, ODSP and IFH plans. There are no government programs for low income uninsured adults. These members of our community have nowhere to turn.

New, non-profit organization

Filling the Gap Dental Outreach is a new, non-profit organization that plans to utilize already functioning community dental clinics in locations across the city to provide free dental treatment to the working poor by volunteer dentists. By utilizing functioning dental clinics off-hours, our patients do not have to choose between missing work/earnings and seeking the care they need. In addition, by having various clinic locations across the GTA, patients have the option to attend a local clinic, further facilitating access to care.

Rexdale Community Health Centre

Our first partnership is with the Rexdale Community Health Centre, in Etobicoke. We are excited to launch our free dental program later this year, the exact timing being dependent upon the COVID-19 situation. Rexdale CHC is passionate about helping those in need within their local community, offering access to a number of services, free of charge. They have generously agreed for us to use their three dental operatories during off-hours, including weekends, in order to help meet the needs of their working poor community. Our volunteer dentists and hygienists will initially be working on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 4 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. and Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Patients will be screened financially, and eligible candidates will be able to access free urgent dental care and hygiene services at the CHC.



The Rexdale Hub Community Health Centre



Left to right: Dr. Amanda Morel and her assistant work at another volunteer clinic.

Plans for the future

In order to maximize the number of patients we can help, our long-term goal is to provide this service in two more CHCs in other parts of the city, including a downtown location. We are also looking for a sponsor to provide funds for a full-time paid dentist and assistant to work alongside our volunteer team at these locations.

Volunteer dentists and hygienists are needed

We will have an urgent need for volunteer dentists and hygienists to fill the schedule at the Rexdale CHC — once we are allowed to open. Most of our volunteer dentists offer four to five hours once a month but this is flexible. Volunteer dentists will work with a paid certified dental assistant to ease the transition of working in a new clinic environment. Dentists at all stages of their careers can benefit from the experience of volunteering. It provides a great learning environment for newly qualified dentists and may also allow recently retired dentists to remain registered with the RCDSO at a reduced fee, provided they meet the RCDSO's criteria.

I have been astounded by the generosity and enthusiasm of so many colleagues who are willing to give up their time and use their dental skills to serve the community. This is an unprecedented time across the globe and

there has never been a more pressing need within the GTA for improved access to dental care. I was recently inspired by an article co-authored by Dr. Carlos Quiñonez and Dr. Keith Da Silva (*Ontario Dentist* "The Organizational Ecology of Dentistry," March 2020) pointing out that dentists are engaged in a "social contract," which binds us to society in the context of our role as a caring profession. Whilst the Canadian health-care system is a valuable asset, it falls short of meeting the dental needs of the working poor. This provides an opportunity for our profession to step up and play a role in helping to fill this gap.

If you are interested in volunteering, please contact Dr. Morel at amandamorel@aol.com. 



Dr. Amanda Morel is a British-qualified dentist and periodontist. After moving to Canada in 2007 she re-certified and is currently practising in Toronto. Dr. Morel is Dental Director at the Urban Dental Clinic and founder of Filling the Gap Dental Outreach. www.fillingthegap.ca.