

# An inside look at Rhode Island's first Mission of Mercy

*Kris Gove, Delta Dental of Rhode Island's new senior communications coordinator, shares his account of volunteering at the inaugural Mission of Mercy event in Rhode Island:*

When you hear about people cobbling together dentures out of their own broken teeth just to get a job, getting up at the crack of dawn to make a few hundred sandwiches just doesn't seem like a big deal.

When I volunteered to serve food and beverages at the first-ever Rhode Island Mission of Mercy, a lot of my daily complaints – traffic, weather, long lines at the grocery store – went right out the window.

## **Early on, an awakening...**

My day began simply enough at 5:30 a.m. and I, along with a few others, was charged with churning out some 300 ham-and-cheese sandwiches for patients waiting in line. Bleary-eyed, I set about my task of making sandwiches and slurping down caffeinated beverages, the smell of bread, cheese and plastic baggies wafting through the air. For the first hour or two, things went great, sandwiches done, but I didn't really see any action.

The next hour, however, was a different story.

Reports from the front lines started pouring in: Someone in line needed something



» A patient checks her new smile in a mirror after getting some dental work done.

to eat, fast, they were going to pass out. Another patient was dehydrated. Yet another hadn't eaten in three days.

I expected to be humbled, but I had no idea just how much.

While the event was very well organized, the sheer amount of people who needed dental work was staggering. Patients, sometimes

whole families, lined the hallways and filled the classrooms outside the operatories at the Community College of Rhode Island's (CCRI) dental clinic.

Patient needs included fillings, root canals, dentures and everything in between. Some patients hadn't been to a dentist for a decade. Some had jobs, but no insurance. Some had no jobs and no insurance. Some were homeless and brought all of their possessions with them.

Thankfully, I had never been in any real natural disaster situation, but this is what I would imagine it would look like. The patients waiting outside for care numbered in the hundreds. Day one was soggy, heavy rains fell all day. Day two, my day, featured the opposite, bright sun and rising temps. Each had their own obstacles.

When it came time to pass out the bazillion sandwiches we made, my eyes were wide open.

Every single outstretched hand that I passed a sandwich to was followed up by a smile, a gracious thank you or a nod of appreciation.



» Long lines at the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy demonstrated the need for dental care around the state. The RI MOM served more than 800 patients.

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After everyone got one, I gave some people two sandwiches – and they were grateful to get it. And I've never seen people so happy to receive a bottle of water.

Plenty of time for mani-pedis and other acts of kindness

As with other MOMs across the country, patients often camp out in line overnight waiting for the doors to open and the pain to stop.

Naturally, 10 hours in line would make some a little irritable. Most however, made the best of a tough situation. Twin sisters, one in for a wisdom tooth extraction, whiled away the time by giving each other mani-pedis in lawn chairs.

A maintenance worker at CCRI found out that a homeless patient needed clothes, so he emptied his locker, giving all his spare clothes to the patient.

Stories like this flowed throughout the entire weekend and still, almost two weeks later, the buzz is still swirling around our office.

Although the post-op meetings have taken place, the pre-event meetings and ideas have already begun for next year's event.

I've already signed up. ■



» DDRI's Dental Director Dr. James Balukjian offers a quick smile between patients in the dental clinic at CCRI.

### RI M.O.M. at a glance

- Delta Dental of Rhode Island was the premier funding partner for the first-ever Rhode Island Mission of Mercy, contributing a \$50,000 donation and an additional \$15,000 for in-kind donations.
- Thirty four (30 percent) of DDRI's employees volunteered for the event.
- Over the course of two days, more than 650 professional and community volunteers helped more than 800 patients, providing more than \$375,000 in free dental care.
- In addition to medical and dental triage, RI MOM dental volunteers provided 330 fillings, 450 extractions, 220 cleanings, 30 root canals and more than 45 removable partial dentures were fabricated and inserted.