

NEWS RELEASE

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Health Fund announces annual Special Project award

Each year the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund pays tribute to a particularly outstanding project to which it has made a grant. For 2009, the Hutchinson-based funder is honoring the Rawlins County Dental Clinic with its Janet Sevier Gilbreath Special Project of the Year award.

Named in memory of the Health Fund's first chairperson, the award is based on service to those in need, volunteer and other financial support incorporated, and good management and financial practices that help assure quality service delivery and sustainability.

The annual recipient is determined by the organization's Board of Trustees. In announcing the 2009 selection, Health Fund president Kim Moore said, "The realization of this clinic reflects Rawlins County's pioneer spirit and determination, as well as a genuine commitment to the health of area residents. We are pleased to recognize the persistence and courage it required to establish accessible dental care in this un-served rural region of Kansas." The Rawlins County Dental Clinic was selected from more than 140 grant projects the Health Fund supported in 2009.

Moore pointed out that Atwood, the largest community and county seat has a hospital, a facility for the developmentally disabled, and a long-term care facility, but the area has been without a dentist for more than 10 years. Of even greater consequence, he emphasized, is that children with Medicaid coverage had nearly a six hour round trip to the nearest dentist who would accept them.

With this critical need for more accessible dental care, community leaders organized and gathered resources with the vision of opening a dental clinic with a dentist who would accept Medicaid and offer a sliding fee scale for those who cannot afford care. Then director of the Rawlins County Economic Development, Chris Sramek, approached the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund about a grant.

In 2006, the Health Fund awarded a \$65,000 grant for equipment and other start-up expenses, subject to the Rawlins County group successfully recruiting a dentist and meeting requirements of dental practice laws.

However, the organization discovered legal and recruitment barriers. As Moore explained, “Dental practice laws existed that limited solutions for rural areas. Organizers had promising dental candidates decline their offers, and their efforts to find an area dentist interested in setting up a satellite clinic were not successful.”

This is where the determination and courage Moore cited were especially evident. After two years of figuring out solutions to all the barriers it encountered, the Rawlins County Dental Clinic opened in April, 2009, as the only safety net oral health provider in the entire region.

By the end of the year -- after nine months of operation -- the clinic had already provided 1,927 services to 956 patients, one-third of whom are uninsured. The clinic has served patients from 12 counties who now have a dental home that accepts Medicaid and offers a sliding fee scale. The clinic also provides dental screenings and outreach services to residents at schools, long-term care facilities, and other locations throughout the region.

Staffed by a dentist three days a week and directed by Heidi Foster, a dental hygienist with an Extended Care Permit (ECP), the three-chair clinic has a second ECP hygienist, two dental assistants, and a receptionist. Sramek, the person instrumental in getting that initial Health Fund grant, is the current president of the clinic’s board.

Although just starting its second year, the Rawlins County Dental Clinic has outgrown its current space and will soon move to a larger facility in Atwood purchased with the assistance of a second Health Fund grant.

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Hutchinson, makes grants each year totaling around \$2.5 million. Since its founding in 1986, the Health Fund has invested more than \$50 million in health, healing, and wholeness for Kansans. Additional information about its grant opportunities and initiatives is available at www.healthfund.org.