

Beaufort County News Release

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH AREA | COMMUNICATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY DEPARTMENT

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Beaufort County Celebrates 15 Years of Supporting Mobile Dental Unit for Local Children

Tooth decay has been cited as one of the most chronic childhood diseases today in the United States and there's a dental service rolling on wheels through Beaufort County to combat it.

Thanks to an annual contribution from Beaufort County Council for the past 15 years, nearly 20,000 Beaufort County children have had the opportunity to receive quality dental care, often for the first time in their life, by hopping aboard the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile.

"If not treated early, dental decay becomes painful, irreversible and can lead to extensive and costly long-term effects", said Dr. Barbara Washington, supervising dentist for the [Ronald McDonald Care Mobile Program](#) and director of dental services for Beaufort Jasper Hampton Comprehensive Health Services. "Untreated dental disease adversely affects a child's ability to eat well, sleep well, and function well at school and at home. Our main goal with this program is to ensure that children in our community are healthy. Helping them feel good about their smile is an added bonus."

The state-of-the-art mobile dental unit features two complete operatories and weighs in at more than 26,000 pounds. Built to deliver pediatric healthcare services, the Care Mobile is 43 feet long, 8 ½ feet wide and nearly 13 feet tall. The unit has self-contained water systems and is completely heated and air conditioned.

[Ronald McDonald House Charities® of the Coastal Empire Inc.](#) donated the mobile unit in 2001 for operation in Beaufort County, making it the first in this area and the ninth in the nation. Today, there are 49 units operating in the United States and abroad focusing on providing access to healthcare where children need it most. Services range from treatment of pediatric cancer to immunizations.

The mobile unit operating in Beaufort County focuses on dental hygiene and provides free dental screenings and preventive treatments for local underserved children typically age 4 to 11 who are unable to visit a dentist on a routine basis.

[Beaufort Jasper Hampton Comprehensive Health Services](#) manages program operations and is the County's partner with RMHC®. According to Roland Gardner, CEO of BJHCHS, the program operates with just one supervising dentist, two dental hygienists and a driver. The team works with school nurses to schedule the mobile unit to serve onsite for one week at a time at various elementary schools during the academic year.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry reports that tooth decay in children is five times more common than asthma, four times more common than early childhood obesity, and 20 times more common than diabetes. Nationwide, an estimated 50 million school hours are lost due to dental-related illnesses, and children from low-income families lose up to 12 times more school hours.

February is National Children's Dental Health Month, an observance which has brought together dedicated health care providers, educators, and others all month long to promote the benefits of good oral health to children.

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Another focus for local health care providers is ensuring that the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile continues to operate and serve the Beaufort County area.

During a recent presentation to the Beaufort County Council Community Services Committee, Bill Sorochnik, Executive Director of RMHC®, indicated that current challenges to maintaining the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile Program include the vehicle's age and replacement costs, as well as misperceptions about funding.

"Seeing the need for dental care services to children in Beaufort County, RMHC® donated the mobile unit 15 years ago to get the Beaufort area started and with the hope that the local community would continue to support the program," Sorochnik said. "Contrary to what many people think, we are not fully funded by McDonalds."

Sorochnik reiterated that the mobile unit has been on the road nonstop for 15 years and the need for mechanical repairs and their associated costs are escalating, adding that the unit needs to be replaced in the near future.

The program receives about 40% of its \$200,000 operating budget from Beaufort County Council as a community service grant allocation. Approximately 45% of the budget comes from the RMHC® operating budget and grants or donations and the remaining 15% is provided through Medicaid reimbursement. Proceeds from pop tabs off aluminum cans also help with program funding. Depending on the volume collected and the price of aluminum, pop tabs turned into BJHCHS and RMHC® can yield as much as \$5,000 annually. Some funding also comes via [the United Way of the Lowcountry](#) in Beaufort.

"All of the partners are proud of the program and are committed to continued collaboration to positively impact the lives of local children who would not otherwise receive the oral care they need," said Monica Spells, an Assistant County Administrator at Beaufort County and its liaison for the dental program. "The County's partnership with RMHC® and BJHCHS is a perfect example of the County's commitment to community services. Now, we really need help from the local community to support a mobile unit replacement fund to keep this critical service available for children in our area."

Sorochnik is currently seeking residents in Beaufort County to serve on a volunteer advisory committee for the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile Program to help with fundraising efforts. The committee would work in tandem with the local RMHC® board.

Pop tabs from aluminum cans can be dropped off at the [BJHCHS Administrative Office located at 721 N. Okatie Highway \(170\) in Okatie](#) or the [RMHC® House in Savannah at 4710 Waters Avenue](#). Other sought donations include toothbrushes for children and travel-size toothpaste which are included in home kits provided to the children who receive services. Stickers and pencils are also needed to help add some excitement to the kits.

Anyone seeking information about volunteering on the Care Mobile Advisory Committee or making a donation to the replacement fund should contact Bill Sorochnik at bill@RMHCcoastalempire.org or 912-350-7641 ext. 304.

[The County Channel](#) filmed a special episode of its show "Coastline" onsite at the Ronald McDonald House in Savannah, which has seen an increase recently in the number of house guests from Beaufort County. The show delves into the mobile dental program and other programs supported by RMHC®. [Click here to view the full video.](#)

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