

SIU Dental Students Provided Free Dental Work to Veterans

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - In recognition of Veterans Day, local veterans received free comprehensive dental work courtesy of the SIU School of Dental Medicine on Thursday, Nov. 9, 2023.

Students and faculty members with the School of Dental Medicine saw nearly 120 veterans throughout the day. They completed as much dental work as possible for every veteran at no cost.

“As a member of this community here in Alton and the Metro East, we have a real commitment to not only be a part of the community, but to be a part of solving

problems,” said Dr. James T. Minor, SIUE Chancellor. “There are real stories that walk through the door here. They have a need. And what’s special about today is that we made a commitment to try to meet those needs.”

Third- and fourth-year dental students saw patients under faculty supervision. They tried to address the most urgent concerns first. If a patient needed more intensive dental work, such as dentures or crowns, the school could help them get on the waiting list for additional care in the future.

Derek Forrester, Director of Clinic Operations, said that the Veterans Care Day is one of his favorite days to work with the School of Dental Medicine. He helped organize the event alongside Katie Kosten, Director of Community Dentistry.

Kosten noted that very few veterans receive dental benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs, which means many veterans go without dental care. The school aims to close this gap.

“We’re here to serve the community. Anything that we can do for the community to help out, we’re very happy to do so,” explained Saulius Drukteinis, the School of Dental Medicine Dean. “With Veterans Day coming up, we want to make sure to recognize the servicemen who have risked their lives to protect us in this country and protect the lives that we have here and the freedoms that we have. So we’re very happy to have them on our campus so that we can provide services to them.”

These examples of community dentistry are what makes the school so unique, Minor added. He said he had heard many “wonderful stories of patriotism and sacrifice” from the veterans, including a few who are SIU alumni. Others, like Eric Meyer, aren’t from the area but traveled over an hour to receive dental care.

“Dental procedures aren’t cheap,” Meyer said. “So any type of benefit, you should take advantage of it.”

During last year’s Veterans Care Day, Meyer learned he had four cavities. They filled two of them that day, and the school told him they could fill the remaining two this year. Meyer was able to secure a day off from work to come to the School of Dental Medicine. He said he always tries to take a day or two off around Veterans Day since his job doesn’t observe the holiday, but it can be difficult to do so.

SIU recognizes the challenges faced by veterans like Meyer, and the School of Dental Medicine tries to address some of these needs every Veterans Day. Minor expressed his appreciation for the faculty and students who make it possible.

“I’m just so proud of the School of Dental Medicine, not only for the organization and execution of it, but the commitment to doing it for our veterans,” Minor said. “My sense is that our colleagues who are in the School of Dental Medicine are not interested in the recognition. What is really special about the School of Dental Medicine is the concept of community dentistry. What’s special here is the commitment to serving communities in need. To me, that’s the real pride.”