

Volunteers will provide free dental care to kids

By Eliza Hallabek
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As a part of National Children's Dental Health Month, local children will open wide for volunteers at the University of New Haven Saturday.

The day will be part of the Give Kids A Smile program, and is a collaborative project between the Connecticut State Dental Association and the University of New Haven School of Dental Hygiene. Some other area dentists also are participating in the program, but at different venues.

Donna Orefice, interim program director at UNH, said the entire junior class of the Dental Program will be involved. That is about 50 students, she said.

Last year, the Give Kids A Smile program at the University of New Haven School of Dental Hygiene provided free dental care to almost 100 children, as part of a statewide program to help underserved children. Dr. Gerald Alexander said the plan is to double the number of children involved in this year's event.

Fifteen dentists, five oral surgeons, a number of residents from Yale-New Haven Hospital, and UNH Dental Hygiene students and faculty have volunteered to treat the children.

Alexander said the day is designed to help children and families, but to also raise awareness on the issue.

Children will be entertained with face painting, puppets, vid-

eos and an appearance by Dudley the Dinosaur, the teeth cleaning prehistoric character that "speaks" for the ADA.

"That's where the (college) students come in," said Gwen Grasso, a dental hygienist and a member of the faculty of the UNH School of Dental Hygiene. The college students will be responsible for helping with the children during the day.

UNH has a clinic with 18 seats, which is the main reason for holding the event there, Grasso said.

Children from families with annual income between \$10,000 and \$20,000 have 10 times more unmet dental needs than children who come from families with income over \$50,000, according to the American Dental Association.

Part of the problem, according to the ADA's Web site, is that plans like Connecticut's Husky Healthcare plan have low reimbursement rates for dentists, and many dentists turn down patients for this reason.

The ADA Web site says Give Kids A Smile was started to encourage parents, health professionals, policy makers and all possible volunteers and to fight what the U. S. Surgeon General calls "a silent epidemic" of dental disease. Across the country more than 758,000 children were helped last February by the event, according to the ADA.

So far, there are 140 children scheduled to be seen at UNH Saturday.

