

Students and faculty from Midwestern University Illinois who participated in the Dominican Republic mission. Dr. Palatinus is on the far left of the second row.

FELLOW IN ACTION

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By Katherine Merullo, Manager, ADA Public Affairs and Advocacy Communications



Dr. Shailee Gupta

Some of the top reasons people say they are unable to get to the dentist are cost, difficulties taking time away from work and lack of transportation according to American Dental Association.

With an average of 34 million school hours lost each year due to dental health problems, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it is critical to address these barriers so that all children – particularly those from under-resourced communities – can thrive.

For two decades, one Central Texas foundation has been doing just that.

With a fleet of nine mobile dental vans serving six school districts in three different counties across the region, the St. David's Foundation Dental Program team delivers state-of-the-art care to children and adults in underserved communities, including high-needs elementary schools. There are approximately 50 dental program staff, including 11 dentists, 4 hygienists, 19 dental assistants, and 16 operations staff members. This is the largest mobile dental program providing charity care in the country.

However, this impressive size and number of patients treated did not start out at this large scale. St. David's Foundation first partnered and created a volunteer-based program back in 2000. Over 20 years, leadership expanded the model to serve more patients, with full time staff who operate regional teams and function like a traditional dental office across Central Texas.

St. David's Foundation has more than 100 nonprofit partners working to advance health equity in the region, and its dental program is just one of its strategic priorities. Led by Dr. Shailee Gupta, Chief Dental Officer at the Foundation and ICD fellow, the dental program

treated approximately 9,500 children, donating services valued at \$8.5 million dollars in free dental care in 2019 alone. Dr. Gupta oversees the operations of the state-of-the-art dental vans with equipment and staff that are able to provide a full spectrum of dental care. The vans, which are equipped with two dental exam rooms, digital x-rays, and computer workstations, also serve as a fun experience for visitors. St. David's Foundation is hoping to reach even more patients with its recent addition of three new mobile dental vans to the fleet.

Working parents often struggle to find time in their schedules to take their children to the dentist. The dental program uses the vans to treat patients throughout the summer months, operating much like a traditional dental office. Dental program staff also serve the adult population at local safety net clinics while schools are on break.

In the wake of COVID-19, the St. David's Dental Program has been hard at work to pivot how they can provide the same quality of care while keeping staff and patients healthy and safe. Currently, the Dental Program has resumed clinical care seeing patients by appointment on a limited basis as they continue to closely monitor evolving guidelines to ensure the safest care and environment possible. Their enhanced infection control procedures and revised dental care protocols follow the recommendations made by the American Dental Association (ADA), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Texas State Board of Dental Examiners (TSBDE), and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

"We're always serving somewhere in the community," Dr. Shailee Gupta shares. "Even as the vans age, we donate them to our safety net partners in the community who are

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The Dentist Visits You

FELLOW IN ACTION — Dr. Shailee Gupta

How the Nation's Largest Charity-based Mobile Dental Program Delivers High Quality Care to Those Who Need It Most

Editor's note: This article originally appeared in the ADA's "New Dentist Now blog", currently called "New Dentist News".

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looking to create 'permanent' dental clinics onsite." In the past, St. David's Foundation has donated vans to rural areas outside of Austin in the Smithville and Elgin areas, with a goal of helping to enable the community clinics in these areas to provide dental care to more patients.

"Our team is honored to provide free dental care to many children in Central Texas," says Dr. Gupta. "Our hope is that our patients leave the van feeling less afraid of the dentist and with a better understanding of oral care in their overall health".

A Replicable Model

The mobile dental vans are inspiring others across the country who come to Austin, Texas, to learn from Dr. Gupta and the staff how they can replicate the program elsewhere to meet patients' needs in their own communities.

Recently, the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine faculty visited Austin to see how St. David's Foundation has designed these vans to provide patients with efficient, quality dental care using state

of the art equipment. The visit inspired the school to invest in building a new mobile van, PennSmiles, to replace their existing van.

"It is incredibly rewarding to host guests from across the nation so they can create and operate mobile programs to better serve their patients and communities," says Dr. Gupta.

To learn more about St. David's Foundation Dental Program and/or discuss how to advance health equity with regard to oral care in your community, please visit our website or reach out to directly to Dr. Gupta at sgupta@stdaidsfoundation.org.



The vast size of this state-of-the art mobile dental clinic is evident when compared to the stature of Dr. Shailee Gupta, Chief Dental Officer, St. David's Foundation.