



Dental Assistant Alex Vilchez, left, talks with patient Recardo Romero, 49, at the Samaritan House dental clinic in San Mateo on November 5. (John Green/Day Area News Group)

Dental Assistant Alex Vilchez, left, examines Ronaldo Romero at the Samaritan House dental clinic in San Mateo. Romero is in the process of getting dentures, with the help of donations to the clinic. (John Green/Day Area News Group)



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Free clinic brings smiles

Samaritan House in San Mateo County offers free dental, medical care

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By Joe Rodriguez
MERCURY NEWS

Still recovering from eye surgery recently, Ronaldo Romero could barely see through one eye as he took a seat at the Samaritan House free clinic in San Mateo. He didn't seem too bothered by the glare of bright sunshine coming in through the window.

"I'm not here for my eyes this time," he explained. "I'm here for my teeth."

Actually, he doesn't have teeth anymore. The 49-year-old unemployed laborer lost them to periodontal disease that went untreated for years. He's halfway to getting dentures.

Alex Vilchez, a dental assistant, escorted Romero into a small room and inspected his gums and two, tiny metal implants that will hold the lower dentures in place. Romero couldn't even drink water without pain several months ago when he walked into the free clinic for the first time.

"He's going to be a new man," Vilchez proclaimed after a quick check.

Even with no teeth and his eyes glazed over, Romero's smile shined. With

after all he's been through. He lost his job at a pallet company when it closed nine years ago. He's been bouncing between homeless shelters or bunking with friends since. Still, with health comes hope.

"I feel more confident these days," the grateful Mexican immigrant said in Spanish. "If I were still in Mexico, I'd be screwed."

Samaritan House opened in 1974 as a referral center for people who needed basic social services. The nonprofit agency steadily expanded, adding a medical clinic in 1992 and a dental clinic in 1998.

It now has dental and medical offices in Redwood City and San Mateo. Romero was referred by shelter operators who noticed he was in a bad way.

He suffered from periodontal disease, cataracts and diabetes — all conditions that could have been detected earlier through private health and dental plans. His said his last steady employer, the pallet company, did not offer coverage.

Nor did he have Medi-Cal, the state-federal medical program for the poor in California. Even if he had, Medi-Cal hasn't covered adult dental care for years. For anyone wondering if the president's new health care exchanges would cover Romero's dental work, the answer is: No. The new program will cover dental care only for children when it kicks in next year.

"Samaritan House is truly a safety net provider," said Dick Gregory, the clinic's dental service director. "The only people who qualify have no insurance whatsoever." Over the past 12 months, the free clinic treated about 9,400 uninsured patients at its offices in Redwood City and San Mateo for medical or dental problems. Romero was a twofer — he needed both, and desperately.

"He was legally blind when I met him," said Sharareh Tajbakhsh, a prosthodontist and former dental director at Samaritan. "Most of his teeth were not salvageable. He didn't have many left." Tajbakhsh is doing all the work herself — at no charge — and she got a dental services company to donate the implants and dentures. Just putting in the implants would have cost Romero \$5,000 in cash.

"Without Samaritan, there's no way he could have paid for that," she said.

Although many of the clinic's patients hold jobs and contribute modest co-payments for treatment and prescriptions, the free clinic depends a lot on volunteer medical and dental professionals like Tajbakhsh to keep costs manageable.

However, medical instruments, bandages, syringes and medicines cannot volunteer themselves. Even at a discount, purchasing them is a major cost. That's where Wish Book readers can help. Samaritan House intends to spend donations on the supplies and pharmaceuticals its doctors and dentists need to deliver low-cost care — like the syringes, anesthetics and bandages Tajbakhsh used to extract Romero's diseased teeth.

She's waiting for the implants to settle in before giving him the dentures, but she's already noticed a positive change.

"He's eating a better diet and moving around easier," she said. "That's what happens with good dental care. It changes your lifestyle when you can eat." Romero agreed.

"They're all good people here," he said. "From the minute I arrived the first time, they have treated me with respect and optimism."

To learn more about Samaritan House's free dental and medical clinics, go