**Papers signed for CCHS dental grant**

**By ABBY ANDREWS Staff Writer**

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DENTONChoptank Community Health System accepted a two-year, $270,000 grant from the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission to bring affordable dental care to Kent County.

Officials from both health organizations, along with local delegates and a representative of Chester River Hospital Center in Chestertown, gathered in the board room of the newly renovated CCHS headquarters building for the official contract signing Aug. 12.

The grant money will support two separate phases of developing dental care in Kent County $70,000 is for a program, already underway, that is providing in-patient surgery at Chester River for patients with severe cases, especially children, and $200,000 will go toward building a new health care facility in Chestertown that will include a four-chair dental clinic. More funding is needed to build the health care facility, however, and CCHS is preparing an application for a federal grant that could provide up to an additional $650,000.

Mark Luckner, executive director of the MCHRC, said with this grant, the five-year-old commission has now served all 24 jurisdictions in Maryland. The grant is one of 14 that were recently awarded across the state, bringing the total number of grants awarded to date to 78.

Doug Wilson, a commissioner on the MCHRC, said the commission was created in 2005 to reduce the number of non-emergent emergency room visits by making primary care affordable for uninsured residents, and to create access to specialty care, including dental services, to those residents.

Wilson said the commission was pleased to give a third grant to CCHS, two of which have been specifically for dental services, because it knows CCHS will do good work with the money.

"We have worked with (CCHS) in the past, and we know they're going to do a great job," Wilson said.

An estimated 3,500 underinsured or uninsured patients will be served by this grant, Wilson said.

Dr. Harry Goodman, director of the state's Office of Oral Health, said he was happy to see Kent County getting dental services, as southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore are the state's biggest problem areas in regards to providing dental services to those who do not have insurance.

"There's not a great supply of dentists on the Eastern Shore to begin with, especially those who accept Medicare, so public health agencies have got to play a role," Goodman said. "This grant is the next step in getting Kent County addressed."

John Strube, chief marketing and development officer for CCHS, said, until CCHS started a similar in-patient surgery program at Dorchester General Hospital in Cambridge last year, most uninsured people's only source for care was to travel to the western shore.

Scott Burleson, executive vice president of Chester River Hospital Center, said the fledgling program already has two privately practicing dentists serving during certain days in the hospital, who are working with Dr. Scott Wolpin, who also works in other CCHS dental facilities, to develop the program's processes for evaluating and treating patients.

"We are fortunate to have his vision and leadership," Burleson said.

Burleson said the program's first two cases were a 3-year-old child who needed 12 fillings, and a 5-year-old child who needed 13 fillings.

"The board was shocked to hear patients with that degree of difficulty are showing up," Burleson said. "This (program) is what we need."

The new health care facility hoped to be built in Chestertown would include, besides the four-chair dental clinic, a family practice and a behavioral health clinic.

Brie Breland, CCHS grants manager, said she is preparing an application, due in November, for a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration of up to $650,000 to supplement the MCHRC grant for construction and start-up costs. Nationwide, 350 grants totaling $28 million are expected to be awarded.

Breland said the grant will be especially competitive because no grants for new facilities in underserved areas have been available for two years.

However, Breland said, HRSA previously awarded a planning and developing grant to the Kent County-based advisory group that conducted a needs assessment for dental services in the county, and the fact the new facility now has a $200,000 grant from the MCHRC shows other agencies believe in the need for the project.

"Having other funding, especially at this level, shows the community is committed and that other organizations can provide money to sustain it in the long run," Breland said.

Del. Addie Eckardt, R-37B-Dorchester, who voted in favor of the legislation that formed the MCHRC, said the $270,000 grant is "kind of a dream come true."

"Due to the complexity of the need for dental care, this will be a very valuable asset for residents," Eckardt said.

Del. Richard Sossi, R-36-Queen Anne's, who also voted in favor of the legislation, said he is confident the money will be put to good use.

"Choptank is a proven winner; they do it right," Sossi said.

Retired CCHS CEO Wayne Howard said even though he is retired and probably not supposed to say anything, he wanted to thank the MCRHC for the grant.

"Thank you for all your support, and for your faith in Choptank," Howard said.