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Dentist Edward J. Houser DDS

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After selling his dental practice six years ago, Dr. Edward Houser planned on easing into retirement by relocating to the North Carolina coast and making occasional trips overseas providing volunteer dental work.

But after arriving in Currituck County, Houser quickly noticed the lack of dental care in his adopted community and decided volunteering close to home was just as useful.

Today, Houser spends two days a week providing dental care to patients at the Currituck Free Dental Clinic. Patients from nine counties seek out his care, dispersed from a 10-foot-by-30-foot mobile dental trailer, lacking a waiting room or restroom, and parked in the lot at the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church in Grandy, N.C.

"I get paid in hugs and handshakes instead of dollars," said Houser, who also dedicates two additional days each week to applying for grants and managing donated supplies, equipment and money.

While offering his services is noteworthy, Houser's story stands out because without him, the Currituck Free Clinic wouldn't exist. After moving to Currituck from northeastern Ohio, Houser was

surprised by the lack of dental care.

"There were no dental clinics from Greenville to the coast," Houser said. "There was no place to volunteer."

Houser bought the mobile dental clinic trailer at an auction from the state of Virginia. He spent six months refurbishing the clinic, using supplies and equipment donated from dental suppliers and other dentists he'd met during more than 40 years of practice, all because he wanted a place to volunteer his dental skills.

"Not everyone retires and does that," said Peter Bishop, director of Economic Development for Currituck County. "He won't let it fail."

With two assistants and an annual budget of about \$35,000, Houser has tended to 787 patients, performed more than 1,775 dental procedures and provided more than \$275,000 worth of free dental care since opening two years ago.

Interestingly, Bishop said most of the free clinic's patients aren't from Currituck County. The farther inland one goes, the harder it is for patients to access dental care, if they can even afford it, he said.

Currituck has a couple of dentists, but some neighboring counties have none. Bishop said it's remarkable what Houser has accomplished in such a short amount of time.

Houser, though, shrugs off any notion his work is extraordinary.

"It's not amazing, it's just somebody in America reaching out to help someone else."

- Ben Werner