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Military veteran Chris Brunelle gets some attention from Windsor dentist Davis Gardner.

By [Matthew Ward](#)

Smiles restored at Suffolk clinic

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A veteran whose benefits don't cover dental and a waitress with an intense toothache were among more than 100 people finally able to get their pearly whites seen to during a free clinic in Suffolk yesterday.

Chris Brunelle was honorably discharged after a six-year stint in the Coast Guard, which included several deployments, including to Haiti.

"We have to get our own dental," Brunelle said. "If anything seriously goes wrong, you can go to a VA (Department of Veterans Affairs) hospital, but dental care is something different."

Like many of those others lying back in rows of chairs with their mouths open, someone told him about the clinic and it sounded like a good idea.

"My ex-girlfriend is in dental school and she told me about this, and one of my fillings fell out the other day," he said.

The free clinic at the National Guard Armory, which continues today, is the result of a combined effort by several organizations, including Obici Healthcare Foundation, The Giving Hand Foundation, Bon Secours, United Way, Access Partnership, the Pankey Institute and others.

Numerous dentists, dental hygienists and assistants, as well as dental students, volunteer their time and expertise.

Access Partnership's Candice Driskell said 100 people pre-booked for the outreach, and beyond that, "We're getting approximately 50 calls a day."

"What we have found is that there are so many people that can't afford dental," Driskell explained.

"Dental is becoming more and more a part of health and overall wellness — people are dying from dental infection."

Fillings — as in Brunelle's case — and extractions are performed, but not dentures.

Waitress Alexandria Hogan was on her way to work at Cracker Barrel Friday when the pain in her jawbone grew too excruciating to bear.

"I was on Facebook and one of my friends posted about a free dental clinic in Suffolk," she said.

“I was on my way to work, and my tooth started to hurt very bad. So I turned out of work and came up here.

“I’m getting two or three taken out.”

Bustling about among the other volunteers were three siblings from a town in North Carolina, Rufus and John Lane and Nellie Broyhill, representing The Giving Hand Foundation.

Rufus and John Lane had driven five hours from Yadkinville with a truckload of equipment, and John Lane was holed up with a few others in a small room off the armory’s main hall, making what he calls “flippers.”

They are rows of false teeth that slot into large gaps in the front of a mouth. “We take an impression of the teeth, and if there’s one missing, then we will pour a mold,” John Lane said.

The teeth are selected from a cabinet full of them, all meticulously lined up on trays, and anchored into a special material used in the mold.

A beneficiary inserts into the “flipper” into his or her mouth, and a smile is instantly restored.

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