



Dental Access Now!

Bringing quality dental care to every community

A UNIQUELY OHIO SOLUTION TO OHIO'S DENTAL CARE CRISIS

Many Ohioans cannot get affordable dental care in their communities—and the problem is getting worse. Dental care is the number one unmet health need for children and low-income adults in our state.



As a result, too many Ohioans live in pain, miss school or work, and even develop life-threatening infections. Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease—more common than asthma. Left untreated, dental decay can impede learning, social development, and proper nutrition. It can also lead to a lifetime of poor health and increased risk of diabetes, stroke, and heart disease. All of this could be prevented if dental care was available when and where Ohioans need it.



The Problem

There are many reasons Ohioans do not get the dental care they need—high costs, misunderstanding or misinformation about the importance of good dental care, no access to providers, and more. We have Ohioans in rural counties who have to drive hours to find dental care. We have Ohioans who live just a mile or two from plenty of dental providers, but who cannot afford the care because of high costs or lack of insurance, or the providers do not accept patients on Medicaid. We have Ohioans who are worried about putting food on the table and do not understand the health risks that come from a lack of adequate dental care.



Where Ohio's general practice dentists decide to set up shop makes a difference in who gets care. Ohio has geographic areas and communities with severe provider shortages. In fact, as of February 2014, Ohio has 84 of them and the number is growing. These areas are geographic and population-based federally designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) that have high population to dentist ratios. Nearly 1.5 million Ohioans live in these HPSAs.

The problem is complex and the solution to getting Ohioans the dental care they need will take a multifaceted approach. Many good efforts are already underway to increase access to care. But, ongoing outreach and education efforts will only increase demand and will put more of a strain on the already overburdened dental care system, especially in communities that have too few dentists to serve the current need. We will not dramatically improve access to dental care without first looking at strategies to expand the dental workforce. Ongoing efforts like loan repayment programs and residency programs offered for dental students in the public health arena are beneficial but only scratch the surface in terms of bringing dental providers to communities that need them the most.

Dental Access Now! has been studying oral health workforce issues for over four years. We have been talking to community-based clinics, dental provider educators, hygienists, dentists, patients, people who cannot find a dentist or afford care, social workers, and other health care providers. We convened a workgroup with representatives from those groups. We have studied dental workforce models from other countries and across the United States. We have had support and technical assistance from some of the best known public health dentists and experts in the nation.

AND, NOW, WE HAVE FORMULATED A PLAN WITH MULTIPLE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS THE SPECIFIC BARRIERS THAT OHIOANS FACE IN GETTING THE CARE THEY NEED. THIS PAPER ADDRESSES OUR WORKFORCE PROPOSALS.

A Uniquely Ohio Solution to Ohio's Dental Workforce Shortage

Based on successfully evaluated workforce models in other states and countries—but adapted to meet Ohio's distinctive needs—Dental Access Now! recommends that Ohio modernize its dental practice laws by:

1. giving hygienists more autonomy to practice to the full extent of their licenses; and
2. expanding the dental team to allow new dental therapists

WE RECOMMEND SEVERAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PATHS TOWARD EXPANDING THE DENTAL PROVIDER TEAM TO INCREASE ACCESS TO CARE.

Dental Hygienists

Dental hygienists provide essential preventive oral care that preserves healthy teeth and gums and prevents decay and disease. As compared to other states, dental hygienists in Ohio have unnecessary limitations on the services they can provide. Ohio should allow qualified dental hygienists to provide dental hygiene services and oral disease prevention to the full benefit of their complete education and training under the remote supervision of a dentist.

Dental Therapist

A dental therapist is a type of mid-level provider who is specially trained in preventive and routine dental care. Working under a dentist's supervision, dental therapists expand the reach of the dental care team, much like nurse practitioners do for the medical care team. Dental therapists provide routine services including fillings and simple extractions. Based on successful programs tested over decades in many countries and recently in the U.S., this addition to the dental team will provide a community-based approach to help alleviate the dental shortage. The Commission On Dental Accreditation recently approved and will begin implementing education standards which will be used by education institutions to develop the curriculum for the education of the dental therapist. The training costs substantially less than that required for dentists and, as a result, will reduce costs for dental care and make it more accessible to people currently going without care. In addition, by allowing dental therapists to perform these routine services, dentists' time will be freed up to focus on the more complex cases or patients with multiple needs or health issues.

Dental Hygienist Therapist

There are two ways to become a dental hygienist therapist. The dental hygienist can take additional training specific to the scope of practice of the dental therapist. The dental therapist can take additional training specific to the scope of practice of the hygienist. At the end of the instruction, the dental hygienist therapist will be able to perform the scope of practice of both hygienist and dental therapist.

Communities with the Greatest Need

To ensure that the new providers are deployed in communities with the greatest need, Dental Access Now! recommends that dental therapists and dental hygienist therapists be limited to practicing in Ohio's dental provider shortage areas. Many of these communities already have health delivery service models that will accommodate dental therapists and dental hygienist therapists into their settings. For example, many federally qualified health centers already have a dentist on staff who cannot meet the demand for services in a primary or satellite clinic setting. Dental therapists could expand the reach of the dentist by filling cavities and performing non-surgical extractions so the dentist could focus on more serious dental or health issues.



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Dental Access Now! is a statewide coalition working to bring quality dental care to every community. Led by UHCAN Ohio, Dental Access Now! is educating the public about the lack of access to dental care and pursuing solutions that include alternative providers to reach underserved communities. We will work to support any organization which seeks to increase access to dental care for underserved Ohioans.

