



Project hopes to boost dental access in Vinton County

Written by: Tyler Buchanan, December 22, 2015

A new health project in Ohio is working to make access to dentist services more available for rural communities like Vinton County.

Dental Access Now! is an ongoing effort to open up new dental practices and find ways to make dentistry care easy and affordable for Ohio residents. The project is spearheaded by the United Health Care Action Network, which operates out of Columbus.

There are very few options for dental care in Vinton County, points out David Maywhoor, a project director with UHCAN. This has profound affects, especially among children: According to Dental Access Now!, a survey of third grade students finds local children to be at higher risk of toothaches and untreated decay than the state average.

Among Vinton County children under 18 years old, nearly a fourth of them have never been to a dentist, DAN says. A much higher amount have not been to a dentist in the past year.

Maywhoor and others involved in the project are lobbying for a specific solution: introducing “dental therapists” to Ohio.

These would be licensed professionals trained to perform some of the more routine dental work. Maywhoor said there is a shortage of new dentists entering the workforce, which may be especially hurting low-population areas. In other states where this idea has been successful, Maywhoor said therapists do not need as rigorous or lengthy of training because their scope of practice is much more narrow.

Dental therapists might be able to host “mobile health sites” at places like schools and nursing homes, he added. Or main dentists can operate a primary clinic (in Athens, maybe) and hire a dental therapist to run a “satellite clinic” in McArthur.

Vinton County residents would visit these dental therapists for normal check-ups and routine procedures. Then if something more complex is needed, the patient could go to a fully-licensed dentist elsewhere.

David Little, a policy communications consultant with DAN, points out that dental therapists have become accepted practitioners in places like Alaska, Minnesota and Europe. To make this happen here, state legislators will have to approve a change in Ohio’s dentist practice laws.

There are critics, particularly with the Ohio Dental Association, who question whether the dental standards are strict enough. Maywhoor said some are also concerned about allowing “lesser qualified” dental therapists operating without supervision of better-trained professionals.

Maywhoor points out that this model has worked in other states and therapists’ education would still train them in about 75 dental procedures.

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For more information on the project, visit www.uhcanohio.org/DAN.