

Good Intended Charity Events May Leave Problematic Gaps in Care

Ohio is making strides in providing access to regular, primary health care. However, the same is not true for access to oral health care. When access to dental care is out of reach or the waiting list at safety-net clinics is too long, many Ohioans rely on free charity care events for care. The providers of care at the events—dentists, hygienists, and dental assistants—are selflessly giving of their time and talents. Yet, the access and care is only temporary for these patients.

The American Dental Association recently released a paper looking at ethical questions raised by temporary charitable events and potential unintended consequences. According to the paper, temporary charitable events “are not intended to provide comprehensive care but rather to provide limited preventive and restorative care; they are not intended to usurp the need for a dental home.” The authors advise event organizers to be “vigilant in educating the patients on the necessity of a dental home and to be certain the patients understand the different nature of the care provided at events.”

In Ohio, there are 84 communities or counties that have been designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas, where there are not enough dentists to meet the needs of the community. In these communities, it is difficult to find a dental home and many residents rely on charity care and an often over-burdened safety net system for care.

We can do better to ensure more Ohioans have access to regular dental care in their own communities.

A more comprehensive and needed approach to the oral health care crisis is to expand the reach of our dental teams and bring down the cost of dental care. Team-based dental care that includes skilled mid-level practitioners can increase access to quality care in a way that is proven and cost-effective. With the number of dental health professional shortage areas in Ohio on the rise, we need to modernize our dental practice laws to expand the dental care team to include mid-level providers, called Dental Therapists, who can treat dental disease.

A Dental Therapist is a mid-level provider who is rigorously trained in preventive and routine dental care. Working under a dentist’s supervision, Dental Therapists expand the reach of the dental care team, providing routine services, including fillings, non-surgical extractions and preventive care. This addition to the dental team will provide a community-based approach to help improve access to needed dental care.

While the need for charity care may never go away, we need to ensure that dental professionals are available for follow-up care and to provide a dental home—particularly in Ohio’s underserved communities.