What is SMILES?
The SMILES Dental Project – Spanning Miles in Linking Everyone to Services – is a pilot project to develop, test and refine a new model for delivering oral healthcare. The purpose of the project is to bring access to dental services to low-income, vulnerable and isolated Coloradans, especially children and seniors. To implement the project, Registered Dental Hygienists are being placed in community settings where they provide expanded, preventive dental care, supervised by a dentist via telehealth technology.

The Challenge
As many as half of all Coloradans don’t receive routine, preventive oral healthcare – most of whom live in low-income, rural communities and are unable to conveniently access the current system of dental care in a traditional dental office. Our vision is to expand access to oral healthcare to improve the overall health outcomes for all Coloradans.

The Opportunity
In 2015, Caring for Colorado and the Colorado Health Foundation launched the SMILES Dental Project – a five-year, $4.7M initiative to bring oral healthcare to low-income, isolated Coloradans with a particular focus on addressing the dental health needs of pregnant women, children, seniors and people with disabilities. Our mission is to expand access to oral healthcare for Colorado’s most vulnerable populations.

Our Goals & Approach
The main goals of the SMILES Dental Project are to:
• ensure that underserved people have access to preventive services and a dental home;
• reach Coloradans that are either unable to, or do not, access the current system of dental care within the traditional dental office;
• expand the oral health infrastructure to provide services in the most appropriate community setting; and
• strengthen Colorado’s oral health workforce by expanding the scope of care a dental hygienist is licensed to perform.

To accomplish these goals, the following organizations are each receiving three years’ funding ($500K) to pilot a new dental care delivery model in Colorado:
• Dental Aid, Inc. serving Boulder County;
• Salud Family Health, serving Morgan and Logan counties;
• Tri-County Health Network, serving San Miguel, Montrose, Ouray and Delta counties;
• Summit Community Care Clinic, serving Lake, Park and Summit counties; and
• Mountain Family Health Center, serving Garfield and Eagle counties.
What is a Virtual Dental Home?
A Virtual Dental Home (VDH) creates a community-based oral health delivery system in which people receive preventive and simple therapeutic services in community settings where they live or receive educational, social or general health services. It relies on the latest technology to link practitioners in the community with dentists at remote office sites. The goal is to have telehealth-connected dental teams working in communities, keeping people healthy by providing education, preventive care, interim therapeutic restorations, triage and case management. Where more complex dental treatment is needed, the VDH connects patients with area dentists.

This system promotes collaboration between dentists in health centers and/or dental offices with the community-based dental team comprising Registered Dental Hygienists (RDHs), dental assistants and case managers. Most important, it brings much-needed services to individuals who might otherwise receive no care. This model relies on the advanced training and community-based practice of a group of oral health professionals. In the VDH, the RDH collaborates with a dentist to provide care. Technology helps bridge geographic distance between the community-based RDH and the dentist. Equipped with portable imaging equipment and an internet-based dental record system, the RDH collects and uploads patient information to a secure website where it’s reviewed by a collaborating dentist who then creates a customized dental treatment plan. From there, the RDH carries out the aspects of the treatment plan that can be conducted in the community setting, including:

• health promotion and prevention education;
• dental disease risk assessment;
• preventive procedures, such as application of fluoride varnish, dental sealants, dental prophylaxis and periodontal scaling (deep cleaning); and
• placing carious teeth in a holding pattern using Interim Therapeutic Restorations (ITRs) to stabilize patients until they can be seen by a dentist for definitive care.

(Source: dental.pacific.edu/Documents/community/special_care/acrobat/VirtualDentalHome_OverviewResults_PolicyBrief_May_2013.pdf)

Interim Therapeutic Restorations
An ITR is a restoration placed on teeth to prevent the progression of caries. The treatment is provided by RDHs without local anesthetic, and using fluoride-releasing glass ionomer on teeth diagnosed with neither necrotic nor irreversible pulpitis. The RDH then refers patients to dental offices for procedures that require the specialized skills of a dentist; and tracks and supports patients’ need for, and compliance with, recommended additional or follow-up dental services. In some cases, the dentist may come to the community site and use portable equipment to provide restorations, or other services that only a dentist can provide. In both scenarios, most patient interactions and efforts to keep people healthy are performed by RDHs onsite in community settings, creating a community-based dental home.

ITRs in Colorado
Colorado House Bill 15-309 supports this model by allowing certified RDHs to place ITRs under the supervision of a dentist via telehealth technology.

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