SMILES Dental Project® – Fact Sheet

What is SMILES?
The SMILES Dental Project – Spanning Miles in Linking Everyone to Services – is an initiative to develop, test and refine a new system for delivering oral health care. The purpose of the project is to bring access to dental services to low-income, vulnerable and isolated Coloradans, especially children and seniors. Using telehealth technology, registered dental hygienists (RDHs) in the field are connected to dentists at a designated dental office. With advancements in technology, it is now possible to share key tools of oral health care – such as X-rays and other visual assessments – with experts who may be hundreds of miles away. By developing a regional dental care delivery system that deploys RDHs into community settings – including schools, community centers, health care offices or group homes – the SMILES Dental Project creates local, onsite dental homes where the need is greatest.

The Challenge
As many as half of all Coloradans do not receive routine, preventive oral health care, 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 health care 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, $4.7 million initiative to bring oral health care to low-income, isolated Coloradans with a particular focus on addressing the dental health needs of pregnant women, children, seniors, people experiencing homelessness, and people with disabilities. Our mission is to expand access to oral health care for Colorado’s most vulnerable populations.

Our Goals and Approach
The main goals of the SMILES Dental Project are to:

- ensure that underserved and high-risk Colorado children, people with disabilities, homeless individuals, and vulnerable seniors have access to preventive services and a dental home;
- expand the oral health infrastructure to reach Coloradans in community settings where they cannot easily access dental care within the traditional system; and
- strengthen Colorado’s oral health workforce by modeling evidence-based dentistry, telehealth connected team-based care, and an expanded scope of practice among RDHs.
To accomplish these goals, the following organizations are each receiving three years’ funding to pilot a new dental care delivery system in Colorado:

- Dental Aid, Inc. serving Boulder County;
- Salud Family Health, serving Morgan, Yuma, Sedgwick, and Phillips counties;
- Tri-County Health Network, serving San Miguel, and Montrose 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. The VDH 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 is 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_OvertureResults_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 uses 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 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.

Website: [www.caringforcolorado.org/smiles-dental-project](http://www.caringforcolorado.org/smiles-dental-project)
Blog: [www.caringforcolorado.blogspot.com](http://www.caringforcolorado.blogspot.com)
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/smiledentalproject](http://www.facebook.com/smiledentalproject)
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