SMILES Dental Project® - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is SMILES Dental Project?

A. SMILES Dental Project stands for **Spanning Miles in Linking Everyone to Services**. SMILES Dental Project is a community-based initiative of Caring for Colorado Foundation and co-funded by the Colorado Health Foundation to expand access to oral health care for Colorado’s most vulnerable populations. SMILES Dental Project combines workforce innovations with advances in technology to close Colorado’s gap in oral health care – especially among pregnant women, children, seniors and people with disabilities.

Q. How does SMILES Dental Project work?

A. SMILES Dental Project establishes a virtual dental home (VDH) by integrating registered dental hygienists (RDHs) into community settings to provide preventive dental care. Via telehealth, 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 that 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.

Q. Why do we need SMILES Dental Project?

A. As many as half of all Coloradans do not receive routine, preventive oral health care, most of who live in low-income, rural communities and are unable to conveniently access the current system of dental care in a traditional dental office. Bringing care directly into communities increases the number of patients served by dental professionals.

Q. Are trained professionals providing the care?

A. Yes. SMILES Dental Project maximizes the care provided by each professional. Registered dental hygienists provide the preventive care they are licensed to provide under current laws and if more extensive treatment is needed, patients will be seen in-person by a dentist. Having the RDH see the patients first lets the RDH address the prevention and education needs, saving the dentist’s time for more intensive restorative and treatment cases.

Q. How are the remote dental teams supervised?

A. SMILES Dental Project sites will be well-equipped and staffed by licensed professionals, and participating dentists will take a close-up look at the work done by their fellow clinicians. The standards of clinical care are the same as in any other dental office.
Q. Does SMILES Dental Project only serve the uninsured?

A. No. In fact, many SMILES Dental Project patients will have insurance. For example, according to the Children’s Dental Health Project, 46.9 million kids are currently covered by Medicaid or CHIP, but only 32% of dentists in private practice report treating any patients on public assistance. That’s where SMILES Dental Project comes in – providing affordable, convenient access to routine, preventive dental services for low-income children, working-age adults and seniors where they are, regardless of insurance status.

Q. What kind of tools are needed?

A. The main technological components for SMILES Dental Project are portable imaging equipment and an internet-based dental records system. Otherwise, the dental teams have the standard prevention supplies for cleanings and fluoride applications like any dental office.

Q. Does SMILES Dental Project compromise quality of care?

A. No. It is a myth that community-centered dental services are second-rate. SMILES Dental Project teams will provide top-quality oral health care to the poorest children and adults in Colorado’s most isolated areas by expanding the responsibilities of RDHs to perform routine and preventive care, and calling on the highest-trained oral health professionals to treat only complex dental health needs. As a result, SMILES Dental Project saves costs and better targets dental services to the needs of each patient.

Q. How much does it cost to run a Virtual Dental Home program?

A. Expenses for SMILES Dental Project include the costs of salaries, materials, equipment, and training to work in a telehealth connected team. Part of what this project will demonstrate is that the costs of these prevention expenses outweigh the costs of neglect: transportation, lost days of school or work, more extensive dental treatment due to neglect, and hospital emergency room visits.

Q. Do Virtual Dental Homes compete with existing dental clinics?

A. No. SMILES Dental Project focuses on areas or populations that are not currently receiving care. The SMILES Dental Project teams will help triage patients who simply need routine, preventive care – which will be professionally and effectively delivered by licensed RDHs in community settings – and those who require an office visit with a dentist to address more complex dental health issues. Patients who are referred to dental offices or specialists for additional care can then more easily make appointments, and arrive with health records, x-rays and a diagnosis already in hand.
Q. Are Virtual Dental Homes compatible with current regulations?

A. Yes. On June 5, 2015, Governor Hickenlooper signed House Bill 15-1309 (HB15-1309) Concerning the Placement of Interim Therapeutic Restorations by Dental Hygienists. The new law expands the dental hygienists’ scope of practice by allowing them to place interim therapeutic restorations under the supervision of a dentist after completing appropriate coursework and applying for and obtaining a permit from the Colorado Dental Board (Board). Applications for permits can be found here.

Q. How can I get involved?

A. We welcome your involvement in SMILES Dental Project. Subscribe to our blog for regular updates on our progress: http://caringforcolorado.blogspot.com/, connect with us on social media: https://www.facebook.com/smilesdentalproject and twitter.com/smilesdentalco, or send us an email, haliepeterson@afl-enterprises.com, to let us know about oral health in your community.

Q. Do the providers need additional training?

A. Yes. Part of having a successful model will mean learning a new way to provide care. SMILES Dental Project has worked with stakeholders and educational institutions to develop a training curriculum for clinical care, disease management, behavior change, and working in telehealth connected teams.

Q. Is my community a part of SMILES Dental Project?

A. Five organizations across Colorado are participating in the SMILES Dental Project:
   - Dental Aid, Inc., serving Boulder county.
   - Summit Community Care Clinic, serving Lake, Park and Summit counties.
   - Salud Community Health Center, serving Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick, and Yuma counties.
   - Tri-County Health Network, serving Montrose, and San Miguel counties.
   - Mountain Family Health Center, serving Eagle, and Garfield counties.

Q. How can we start a program like this in our state?

A. The SMILES Dental Project is currently running in Colorado only, so you may need to be the champion for your own community. We will share all the results of this project publicly and would be happy to offer guidance to stakeholders in your state as our project develops.