

Increasing Access to Oral Health Care in Missouri: One Funder's Approach

CYNTHIA P. HAYES

Program Officer, Missouri Foundation for Health

The Surgeon General's report states that oral health is essential to general health and well-being. The consequences of poor oral health range from difficulty eating, speaking, and learning in children to missing work, having diabetes-related complications and adverse pregnancy outcomes, and being at risk of heart disease and stroke. Good oral health is achievable for all, but not everyone is achieving it to the same degree. Vulnerable populations, such as children living in poverty, older adults, and racial and ethnic minorities, are more likely to experience oral health problems.¹

Oral health is a vital aspect of overall health, yet Missourians face many oral health challenges, including:

- inadequate oral health care capacity (locations and providers),
- lack of insurance coverage, and
- low use of care.

THE ORAL HEALTH LANDSCAPE IN MISSOURI

Access to oral health care remains a significant challenge across Missouri, due to many key factors:

- Medicaid benefits for adult oral health care were discontinued in Missouri in 2005.
- Missouri was without a state dental director for a decade.
- Medicaid reimbursement rates are low, while the administrative burden is high.
- The majority of the state's counties (89 percent) are designated as Federal Dental Shortage Areas.
- Scope-of-practice laws have not been expanded.
- Emergency department visits for preventable, nontraumatic dental complaints continue to rise.
- The state has only one dental school (outside of the MFH funding area).
- The state lacks an oral health plan.
- The state lacks a voice at the state capitol for oral health policy issues.
- The state lacks a repository for state oral health data.

As a result, more than 850,000 adults in the state are without coverage for oral health services. Children's oral health coverage is provided through Medicaid, however only approximately 34 percent of those who are eligible use it. Accessing oral health care is difficult for low-income Missourians, especially those living in the state's rural areas. Though Missourians display poor outcomes across all ages relative to the country, the largest population in need is low-income adults, many of whom are unable to afford care and are without coverage for care.

In January 2016, Missouri's governor reinstated adult Medicaid benefits for oral health services, which will assist in building a more efficient system and help alleviate the pain and discomfort of untreated oral disease. Most of the estimated 300,000 adults who are eligible for Medicaid in Missouri and will now gain dental coverage have had little or no dental care in the previous decade, and are likely to require a lot of care and treatment over a number of visits. This increasing demand for oral health services is likely to tax the few dentists and clinics accepting Medicaid. Dental services offered through Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) will help, however their capacity is limited.

THE MISSOURI FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH RESPONSE

Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) takes a multifaceted approach to health issues, understanding that programs, policy, and education all play a role in making lasting positive change. Our mission is to improve the health of the people and communities we serve.

In 2013 MFH established a multiyear initiative to address access to oral health care in our region. The Oral Health Initiative is designed to address the lack of access to quality, affordable oral health care for underserved adults and children in the MFH service region. Approximately \$15 million was expended in the first three years of the initiative to expand the capacity and infrastructure of Missouri's oral health system.

The Oral Health Initiative has resulted in a significant increase in access to oral health care. Programs funded under this initiative have been community initiated and partnership

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000). *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General*.

focused, with the goal of identifying coverage gaps, developing innovative strategies, and either creating new opportunities or improving existing opportunities to increase access to oral health care. The initiative's funding streams have formed the components of a comprehensive approach to support the safety-net dental clinics and overall dental public health within the current environment of oral health in Missouri.

Evaluation and technical assistance were structured to ensure successful implementation of grant activities. Evaluation information was collected through teleconferences with grantees, site visits, interim and final report reviews, and regular conference calls with the initiative's external evaluator and consultant. The initiative focused on three approaches:

- increased number of touchpoints (places people go to receive oral health services),
- increased number of providers, and
- expanded insurance coverage and acceptance.

Through a series of funding programs aimed at increasing the capacity of Missouri's safety-net providers (such as FQHCs, free clinics, and health departments), MFH has provided them with approximately 70 dental operatories, 50 x-ray machines (digital, handheld, panoramic), and 55 sterilizers, thus increasing access to approximately 28,000 additional patients. Other funding has emphasized creating and enhancing partnerships between organizations that have not been focused on oral health (such as behavioral health providers and schools) and safety-net oral health providers to deliver services to populations that would traditionally remain unserved.

Additionally, MFH played a key role in establishing the Missouri Coalition for Oral Health, the only organization in the state devoted to improving the oral health of all Missourians—including the underserved, uninsured, and underinsured—through sound public policy and public awareness. The coalition's efforts include advocating for state policy changes that support access to care and improve oral health services and supports.

MFH worked in partnership with the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services and other Missouri foundations to provide funding that resulted in a state report on Missouri's oral health burden. This report is the first comprehensive document containing all available oral health data produced by the Missouri Oral Health Program. The purpose of the report is to identify the state's oral health trends and disparities and to disseminate those findings to residents, stakeholders, partners, and decisionmakers. This report was used to inform Missouri's new five-year state plan for oral health.

Missouri has also gained a second dental school, as well as a 92-chair dental clinic in St. Louis. The clinic is expected to provide comprehensive oral health services to approximately 9,800 underserved adults and children annually. The clinic

will serve as the primary clinical education site for A.T. Still University's third- and fourth-year dental students.

Whereas current Medicaid coverage of dental services for adults in Missouri is limited to trauma of the mouth, jaw, or teeth as a result of injury or medical condition, in April 2016, adult oral health Medicaid services will be expanded to include preventive and restorative services, periodontal treatment, oral surgery, extractions, radiographs, pain evaluation and relief, infection control, and general anesthesia. This expanded coverage will assist in building a more efficient Medicaid system and help alleviate the pain and discomfort of untreated oral disease for newly covered underserved adults.

Lastly, Missouri has hired a new state dental director. This position will enable the state to attract federal funds in support of important oral health issues.

FORGING AHEAD

While measurable progress has been made to increase access to quality, affordable oral health, the oral health environment in Missouri is still in a critical state and many challenges remain:

- Only 10.8 percent of the state's licensed dentists participate in the Medicaid program.
- The state is experiencing an increasing lack of capacity to provide adequate care throughout the oral health system.
- Eighty-nine percent of the state's counties are designated as federal "Dental Shortage Areas."
- Scope-of-practice laws have not been expanded.
- The need to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates and lessen administrative burden continues.

The key to our success has been developing partnerships and eliciting community input. MFH's Oral Health Initiative has been intentional in seeking input from community organizations, oral health providers, and other key stakeholders around the state. Communities know what interventions/solutions will work best for their residents. Interventions and programs to address the problem in Missouri will have to be as diverse, unique, and innovative as the communities we serve.

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