



# Community Health Centers: Access to Dental Care

Over the past 20 years, Washington's community health centers (CHCs) have increased access to dental services, providing care to thousands of children and adults in need. The recent restoration of Medicaid adult dental benefits and the expansion of Medicaid will provide CHCs the opportunity to expand access and further incorporate oral health into primary care for low-income and underserved adults.

**CHCs Provide Access to Essential Oral Health Care Services:** Washington's CHCs include 82 dental clinics that provide comprehensive oral health care. In 2012, these clinics served 262,670 patients in need of treatment and preventive services. Most CHC dental patients are on Medicaid or are uninsured.

## Children

Although our state has made progress to treat children's dental disease, there is still more work to be done. Washington data shows:

- Nearly 40% of children start Kindergarten with tooth decay, and
- Dental decay is more prevalent for low-income and racial/ethnic minority communities.

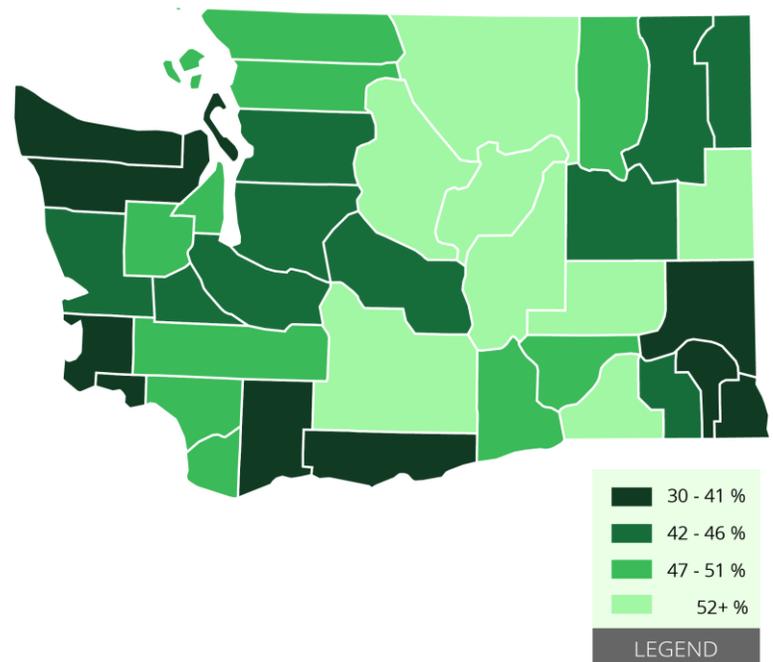
Untreated dental decay can result in painful infections that can impact a child's ability to communicate, develop, and learn.

Since dental disease can be prevented it is especially important that young children have access to dental care. To address this, CHC dental clinics in the past few years have focused on ensuring that children under age two who see a doctor for a well-child visit also see a dentist for oral health care.

Through this effort and other partnerships, CHCs are contributing to increased access to dental care for young children. Statewide, Medicaid dental utilization for children under age six has nearly doubled. CHCs are working to ensure that this upward trend continues so that we significantly reduce the number of children that start school with tooth decay or other oral diseases that can negatively impact their development.

## CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE

Rate of Dental Visits for Medicaid Enrolled Children  
Birth to 5 Years Old [ FY 2012 ]



## Adults

Despite the significant reductions of Medicaid dental benefits for adults in recent years, CHCs have remained committed to providing dental services to as much of the adult population as possible.

While the significant reduction of Medicaid dental benefits in recent years has been a challenge for dental clinics, CHCs have remained committed to serving low-income adults in need. The patients they serve often have a higher need for dental care since dental disease is more prevalent among low-income individuals. It is vitally important they receive care to treat and prevent oral health problems before they lead to painful and expensive emergency room visits. CHCs have supported and championed the restoration of Medicaid adult dental benefits in order to increase access, decrease patient suffering, and decrease costs to the system.

### Oral Health Impacts Overall Health

Oral health is especially important for low-income adults with chronic conditions. For example, adults with diabetes are especially at risk for a continuing cycle of dental and medical problems if oral health needs are not addressed—higher blood sugar levels can lead to dental decay, infection, exacerbate diabetes and lead to complications. This impact to overall health can lead to increased medical needs and costs.

### New Opportunities to Improve Access and Coordinate Care

The Medicaid adult dental benefit was reinstated effective January 1, 2014 to coincide with the expansion of Medicaid in Washington.

#### What does this mean?

- Nearly 488,000 adults that were already eligible for Medicaid now have access to comprehensive dental care.
- Adults newly eligible for Medicaid now also have a dental benefit that is matched at 100 percent with federal funds.

CHCs are expecting to expand the number of dental clinics in the next five years to accommodate the demand for oral health care.

To promote a whole person approach to improve and coordinate the delivery of care, CHCs are making efforts to connect dental care with primary care. A key goal is to leverage the co-location of dental clinics with medical clinics to bridge the usual division between these services. Through these efforts, medical and dental teams can improve patient education and awareness and make referrals for care more efficiently.

### Workforce

Ensuring that there is an adequate workforce to meet increasing need is an important issue for CHCs.

To increase workforce capacity, some CHCs are using auxiliary dental providers such as Expanded Function Dental Assistants (EFDAs) which work as a part of a dental team. Other strategies CHCs employ to recruit and retain providers include loan repayment and use of scholarship programs.