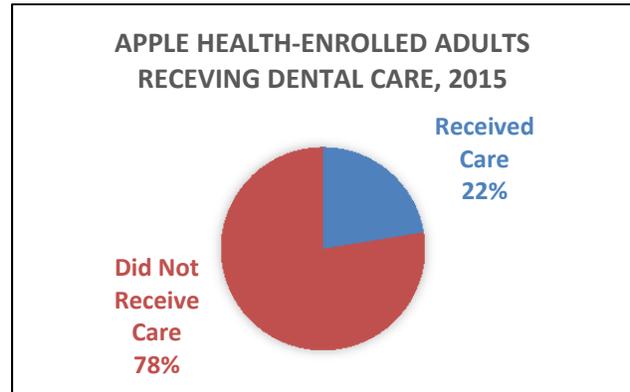


## Position Paper: Increase Oral Health Access by Investing in Community Health Center Dental Clinics

**The Legislature should make a \$15 million capital investment in community health center dental clinics, which will increase access to oral health care for low-income and uninsured Washingtonians.**

Washington’s health care safety net faces a crisis in oral health capacity. The implementation of health care reform – including Medicaid expansion and the reinstatement of preventive and restorative oral health benefits for adults in Washington Apple Health – has made huge inroads in extending dental coverage to low-income individuals and families. These coverage expansions, however, have revealed a serious lack of dental care capacity.

In 2015, only 22 percent of Apple Health-enrolled adults used their dental coverage. No data exists for 500,000 uninsured Washingtonians, nor for individuals and families who have medical coverage but no dental coverage. Many low-income patients have not seen a dentist in years, and often haven’t had regular dental care in their lifetimes. This leads to a long-term accumulation of oral disease – multiple cavities, broken teeth or abscesses, gum disease, and oral infections.



### Community Health Centers Have Stepped Up to Help – But Need Capital Investments to Do More

Washington’s community health centers (CHCs) have worked tirelessly to expand access to dental care. Between 2014 and 2015, the number of Apple Health-enrolled adults who received dental services at CHCs increased by 55 percent. CHCs have used existing resources to expand services not only within their own walls, but in mobile outreach units, homeless shelters, supportive housing units, and community centers. In 2015, over 30 percent of Apple Health-enrolled children and 49 percent of Apple Health-enrolled adults who received oral health services did so at a CHC. For low-income patients without dental insurance, CHCs offer a sliding fee scale to ensure that services are available regardless of ability to pay.

CHC Dental Access Package	
Total Projects	22
New Dental Chairs	129
New Patients/Year	65,150
New Visits/Year	166,370
Total Cost	\$15 million

Nevertheless, our state must provide at least 630,000 more visits per year to ensure that low-income individuals and families get the care they need. To begin to close this gap, Washington CHCs are seeking capital investments to build and expand dental clinics.



### **CHC Dental Clinics Will Serve More and More Patients Over Time**

The number of patients who can be served by these new CHC dental facilities is likely to *increase* over time, making this package an ideal capital investment. Due to lack of access, many low-income patients have accumulated numerous oral health problems. Many of the projected 65,000 new patients will have complex restorative care needs that will require multiple appointments per year. As these patients transition to less-frequent preventive care, more and more patients will be served.

These projects are shovel-ready, with many community and funding partners ready to ensure their success. We expect each of these clinics to be open and serving patients within two years.

### **Oral Health Care Changes Lives**

Low reimbursement rates limit the number of appointments that private dental practices can make available to Apple Health clients. This frequently leads to long appointment waiting periods – sometimes, it can take months to get treatment. Low-income and uninsured individuals often delay care until extreme pain makes waiting unbearable, and ultimately seek more costly emergency room treatment. Poor oral health also complicates the management of diabetes and is linked to some types of cardiovascular disease. CHC dental clinics not only help prevent and treat serious dental and medical complications, but also connect patients with primary care, behavioral health, case management, and all of the other integrated services that CHCs offer.

### **Bolster the State's Investment in Low-Income Oral Health**

To increase access to oral health care, the Legislature should make a \$15 million capital investment in CHC dental facilities. Each project, tailored to the distinctive needs of the community it serves, will make an enormous difference in the lives of thousands of low-income and uninsured patients.

(Revised Feb. 28, 2017)