

Good Oral Health is Essential to Overall Health

*Recommendations from the
PA Coalition for Oral Health (PCOH)*

Oral health is linked to our physical and emotional well-being. When the mouth is healthy, the body is more likely to be healthy, too.

Dental caries (cavities) and periodontal (gum) disease are the two major dental diseases that impact all segments of society. Every day, Pennsylvanians are affected by the serious consequences of the lack of access to oral healthcare.

The consequences of untreated dental disease include pain, costly dental treatments, emergency room visits, absence from work or school, and worsening of systemic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Students miss school.

Caregivers miss work for their loved ones' appointments.

Individuals make costly emergency department visits for dental problems.

Employees are underutilized due to appearance.

Pennsylvanians of all ages suffer daily from dental pain.

Children are hospitalized with serious infections.

Fortunately, dental disease and its consequences are preventable. This brief outlines key actionable strategies for achieving good oral health for all Pennsylvanians.

A CALL TO ACTION

PCOH urges Pennsylvania's decision makers to fund oral health as a priority in the Commonwealth.

- 1. Support evidence-based oral health prevention programs and education at the state and local levels.***
- 2. Promote and fund strategies that will increase the oral health workforce capacity and effectiveness.***
- 3. Fund oral health infrastructure through state appropriations.***

These recommendations are aligned with and supported by the PA Oral Health Plan, State Health Improvement Plan, and Health Innovation Plan.

Issue #1: Access to Oral Health Care and Prevention

Effective prevention requires both regular dental visits and patient and community education of behaviors that can prevent oral disease. Families need to know how and when to use the dental delivery system, as well as motivation, incentives, and access to do so.

When it comes to oral health, different people have different needs. Some people can make dental appointments during the weekday, but others can only go on nights or weekends. Some people can hop in the car and drive to the local clinic, while others rely on buses and trains to get to the dental office. Some people know their dentist speaks their language, but others can't make that assumption. A one-size-fits-all approach to oral health may sound like a good way to support equal access to oral health care—but it doesn't work in practice. We need to make sure all people have the supports they need to access oral health care.¹

Pennsylvania is fortunate to have a well-trained medical and dental work force. Connecting these professionals with the people who need their services is a challenge in our large and diverse state. Technological innovations such as teledentistry and collaborative innovations like providing dental care in schools could help increase access and improve prevention.

Recommendations

Support evidence-based oral health preventive programs and education at the state and local levels:

- **Require oral health in K-12 Health and Physical Education Standards**
- **Revise current mandated dental screening program**
- **Increase school health appropriations to encourage more Dental Hygiene Services Programs (DHSPs) and School Sealant Programs (SSPs)**
- **Address transportation barriers for dental and medical needs**
- **Provide care in community locations to meet people where they are**
- **Authorize and provide for insurance coverage of teledentistry**
- **Increase access to optimally fluoridated water**

Issue #2: Oral Health Workforce



More than 16% of the population in Pennsylvania lives in Dental Health Provider Shortage Areas (DHPSAs). A DHPSA is defined as an area where there is less than one provider per 5,000 patients.² The dental workforce is not evenly distributed, particularly in rural areas, and providers do not always accept all forms of insurance. Out of more than 10,000 dentists in the state, only 143 are pediatric dentists who accept Medicaid.³ There are also groups such as young children or those with intellectual and developmental disabilities who need providers educated in how to care for them.

Despite being home to twelve dental hygiene programs and four of the nation's 64 dental schools, Pennsylvania's pipeline of oral health professionals is insufficient. The state also significantly under-utilizes auxiliary professionals such as the state's 800 Public Health Dental Hygiene Practitioners (PHDHPs) and 2,300 Expanded Function Dental Assistants (EFDAs).

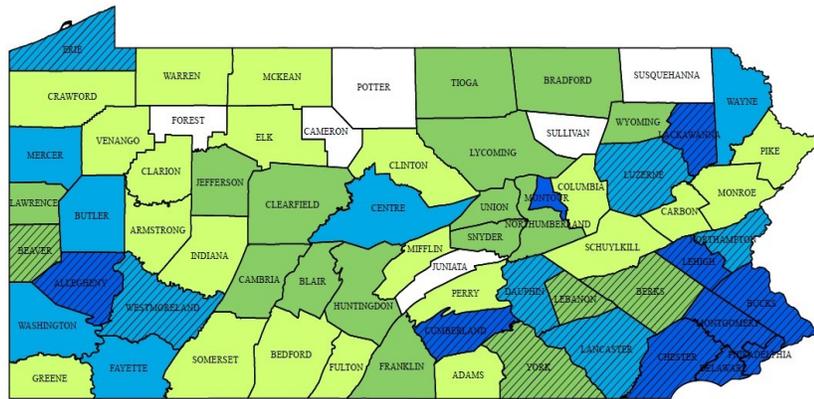
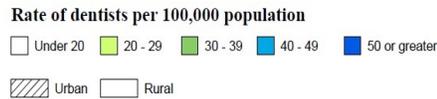


Table 1 ³



Recommendations

Promote and fund strategies that will increase the oral health workforce capacity and effectiveness:

- Increase the ratio of oral health care professionals to the population in DHPSAs
- Support increased incentive programs such as loan reimbursement for dental professionals working in DHPSAs
- Streamline enrollment and credentialing processes and increase dental reimbursement rates to encourage more dentists to participate in Medicaid
- Provide reimbursement opportunities for Public Health Dental Hygiene Practitioners and other dental auxiliaries working in DHPSAs and public health settings

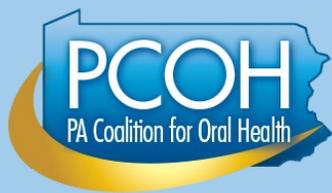
Issue #3: Infrastructure

It is essential that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania strengthen infrastructure and capacity to improve dental public health programs

In 2016, the Pennsylvania Department of Health partnered with dental providers, public health professionals, and advocates to assess the oral health needs in Pennsylvania and develop a comprehensive 2017-2020 PA Oral Health Plan (OHP). Among the key recommendations of the OHP are the development of an ongoing oral health population-based surveillance system, and the hiring of a full-time state dental director who will assess, plan, direct, administer, implement, and evaluate statewide oral health systems and services.

Federal funding has been secured to hire a full-time dental director, which will bring Pennsylvania into compliance with Act 87 of 1996, and ensure that the oral health program has strong leadership.

However, unless state funds to sustain the dental director position are made available before the federal grant expires in 2023, Pennsylvania is at risk for both falling out of compliance and losing critical oral health infrastructure.



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Recommendations

Improve the oral health care infrastructure of Pennsylvania:

- Provide sustainable funding through state appropriations for state dental director position
- Support implementation of the 2017-2020 Oral Health Plan
- Develop an oral health surveillance system for Pennsylvania
- Recognize oral health as a National Performance Measure (NPM) in state maternal and child health agencies

WHO WE ARE

The PA Coalition for Oral Health (PCOH) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization of community champions and advocates representing schools of public health, philanthropic organizations, businesses, dental and medical organizations, health facilities, insurance companies and advocacy organizations committed to improving the oral health of all Pennsylvanians.

Our **MISSION** is to improve oral health for all Pennsylvanians by uniting stakeholders to advance advocacy, policy, education and innovative approaches.

PCOH has a **VISION** that optimal oral health is essential to overall health and wellness, and benefits ALL Pennsylvanians. By bringing together oral health advocates and professionals to share the best and most innovative approaches, PCOH serves as the dynamic leading voice to improve oral health across the Commonwealth.

We strive to fulfill our mission by advancing policies and practices that increase access to oral health services and prevention-oriented education, especially for our most vulnerable Pennsylvanians.

Contact us and learn more by visiting our website, www.paoralhealth.org.

References

¹ Frameworks Institute. (n.d.). Framing Recommendations. Retrieved from <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/dentaquest/fr1.html>

² Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) Application and Scoring Process. (2018, July 01). Retrieved from <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/shortage-designation/hpsa-process>

³ 2015 Pulse of Pennsylvania's Dental and Dental Hygienist Workforce (March 2018 ed., Vol. 7, Rep.). (n.d.).