



“I’ve always believed that all children deserve equitable care to help them build a strong, healthy foundation for their lives.

DR. MEGHA SATA,
Give Kids A Smile
National Advisory Committee



Volunteer Voices: Give Kids A Smile®

Dear Colleagues:

As a leader, I recognize that the ADA’s successes are the result of collective effort across our organization. Each of us makes a difference by stepping up and contributing in ways we’re passionate about. For many of you, this includes volunteer service on the ADA’s councils, committees, and other leadership bodies that keep our Association forging ahead. (See some of the latest from our councils and committees in the recent major actions and minutes at the end of this Update.)

In the coming months, in appreciation for all you do, I’d like to showcase some of the people and programs that help drive the ADA’s mission to help dentists succeed and advance public health.

Last month marked the [virtual kick-off](#) of the ADA’s 2021 [Give Kids A Smile \(GKAS\)](#) program. For the past 18 years, thousands of dental personnel have volunteered to provide more than six million underserved children with free oral health services and education through GKAS.

Children from low-income families are twice as likely to have cavities compared to those from high-income households, and the realities of the pandemic have compounded the need for care. Although 2021’s local and national events look different than those of previous years, GKAS continues with the added protocols that have proven to keep dentistry safe.

A [GKAS ambassador](#) and a member of the ADA’s Give Kids A Smile National Advisory Committee, Megha Sata, D.D.S., is the dental director at the South Bay Children’s Health Center in Lawndale, Calif. In her work to help vulnerable populations achieve optimal health, Dr. Sata has also been

instrumental in connecting elementary school students with oral health care through GKAS.

Below, she talks about seeing firsthand how the pandemic has affected community health, her plans for a modified 2021 GKAS event, and how dentists and their teams can get involved in their areas.

Read Dr. Sata's story, and forward it to your network. Giving back is a key feature of leadership, and through programs like [GKAS](#) and other forms of outreach, we can continue to drive dentistry forward for the communities that need it the most.



Daniel J. Klemmedson, D.D.S., M.D.

President

Q&A with Dr. Megha Sata

ADA: How have you seen the COVID-19 pandemic affect oral health and access to dental care in underserved communities?

Dr. Sata: The patients we serve are best supported by having frequent and consistent visits. In fact, at our clinic, we often recommend three-month visits for kids who are at high risk for caries. In some cases, we haven't seen patients in a year and a half, and now they're experiencing significant dental pain and abscesses. The prevalence of dental caries is higher now that children are at home snacking more frequently. I've also observed more anxiety and depression in our population of adolescents, which can contribute to poorer oral health as performing self-care and hygiene often goes by the wayside. Our dentists are seeing a higher frequency of patients with fractured teeth from grinding and clenching as stress and anxiety are rampant now.

Parents are trying to provide their children with the best care that they can, but as far as access to care goes, many clinics have been operating at reduced capacity for nearly a year now. For example, county clinics have deployed their dental personnel to medical sites to help with the COVID-19 vaccine effort. They've had to redirect their resources to meet the medical needs of communities that have been hit harder by COVID-19. Many underserved patients are likely going to emergency rooms in search of help for their severe dental pain.

ADA: Tell us about your local GKAS program

Dr. Sata: In a typical year, each fall, our community clinic starts by doing screenings for all of the elementary students in the local school district. Any kids who have urgent needs are then brought in for free comprehensive exams, and then for our two-day GKAS program for treatment. Our dental volunteers do as much treatment as safely and comfortably as possible. We also have

specialists in the community who are willing to treat patients. We've built up a strong network of volunteer dentists who are aligned with the GKAS mission.

During GKAS, we cover 30 to 40 appointments a day. Children receive free exams, x-rays, oral hygiene instructions, education, nutritional guidance, and restorative and surgical treatment. For those who need work beyond what we can complete during our event, our community clinic will then take on those patients and provide them with a dental home. We have different grants to complete their care so we're helping the kids comprehensively. Lastly, we keep them on a routine recall schedule for prevention.

Unfortunately, we had to cancel last year's event, but we are looking ahead to a modified event in 2021. I'm working with the head nurse of a local school district to create a digital toolkit that includes the ADA's [MouthHealthy](#) resources, and we're also providing oral health kits for kindergartners and first graders in the district. We're creating a list of resources for parents in need of a dental home for their children as well.

ADA: How can dentists get involved in GKAS programs in their own communities?

Dr. Sata: Finding the closest location that's doing an event and simply volunteering is a great way to get involved. But if you want to do more than that, there are many [resources online](#). Dentists can also e-mail gkas@ada.org, a local GKAS ambassador or connect with a dental school or their state and local dental associations.

Most dentists are working again, and the research supports that dental care is safe with all of our precautions in place. It may be about simply opening up your practice for free exams and cleanings on a particular day. It doesn't have to be a full-scale event—Give Kids A Smile is really what you make it. It's about raising awareness and providing resources for the community.

ADA: Why is community health so important to you?

Dr. Sata: Now more than ever, when it comes to equities in health care, there are huge disparities. I've always believed that all children deserve equitable care to help them build a strong, healthy foundation for their lives.