

New report shows Colorado making strides statewide on dental access

A recent report by the Colorado Health Institute (CHI) – titled “Filling the Gap” – raises concerns about the ability of Coloradans, including those who utilize Medicaid for coverage, to access dental care.

The CDA agrees that dental access is a priority for Colorado and is continuing its front-line work to ensure that underserved populations and communities have direct access to dentists. The CDA and its leadership understand how important it is ensure that vulnerable Coloradans

receive the quality dental care only a dentist can provide.

The good news is that solid strides are being made to improve access to dental care, and that there are many stakeholders – including the CDA, dental hygienists, state agencies and DentaQuest – focused on addressing remaining gaps and continuing to improve access across the state.

The CHI report highlighted several important aspects of the oral health community’s efforts to improve dental access across Colorado.

Challenges exist, but dentists are making progress on access

- ✓ 99% of Coloradans live in counties with access to a dentist
- ✓ 97% of Colorado’s dentist workforce needs are currently met
- ✓ 17% increase in dentists accepting Medicaid patients during the 1st year of a new adult Medicaid dental benefit

99% of Coloradans live in counties with access to a dentist

Central to CHI’s report is a focus on “dental deserts” – eight counties that currently “have no dentists, no Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) with dental services, and no Community-Based Dental Clinics (CBDCs).”

- ▶ While the CDA recognizes the real access challenges faced by segments of Colorado’s population, CHI’s report notes more than 99% of Colorado’s population lives in a county with a dentist. Colorado’s eight “dental desert” counties account for “less than 1% of Colorado’s total population.”
- ▶ While ensuring access to dental care for all Coloradans is a top priority, the CDA believes that focusing solely on arbitrary county borders to measure dental access does not accurately demonstrate need nor availability of dental services in many parts of Colorado.
 - ▶ Better measures that account for proximity to regional health and commerce hubs and geographic service areas should be explored. Health statistical regions are used as a measure of access in medicine. Geographic distance (or drive time) is another option that may provide a better measure of access than county lines.



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- ▶ To address remaining access needs, the CDA is committed to innovation in connecting patients in underserved areas with dentists. The CDA and its leadership understand how important it is to ensure that vulnerable Coloradans receive the quality dental care only a dentist can provide.
 - ▶ The CDA is working to help dentists establish sustainable practice sites in areas that currently lack a dentist. This hub-and-spoke pilot program will partner dentists with primary care doctors, hospitals, dental hygienists and other community resources to provide innovative models of dental care for patients in rural and other underserved communities.
 - ▶ The CDA is currently working with communities in northeastern (Phillips County) and southeastern (Baca County) Colorado to open new hub-and-spoke dental facilities in these areas.
- ▶ Another strategy to address needs in underserved parts of Colorado is to better utilize our existing dental team. The CDA agrees with CHI's statement that "dental hygienists are critical partners in the oral health workforce," and has sought to make sure existing dental team members, like dental hygienists, can practice to the full extent of their capacity and training.
 - ▶ The CDA supported legislation in 2014 to extend limited prescriptive authority to dental hygienists to enhance preventive care services available to patients.
 - ▶ The CDA is also supporting a 2015 legislative effort to allow dental hygienists to provide interim therapeutic restorations – allowing dental hygienists to help temporarily stop decay until a patient can see a dentist for permanent treatment.
- ▶ The dental stakeholder community is broadly engaged in numerous additional projects to help address remaining gaps.

97% of Colorado's dentist workforce needs are met

CHI's report states that the "Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) estimates that Colorado needs an additional 87 dentists to meet the need for dental care in underserved regions across the state."

- ▶ This estimated need of 87 dentists means that Colorado has 97% of its needed dental workforce numbers in place.
- ▶ CHI's report notes that Colorado's dentist workforce supply increased by a net of 4%, or 150 dentists, in just one year (between 2013 and 2014).
- ▶ The University of Colorado School of Dental Medicine is graduating more than 115 new dentists each year. The CDA is working with dental students and its New Dentist Committee to raise interest in practicing in underserved communities.
- ▶ CHI's report also noted that Colorado has one dentist for every 2,022 residents. To ensure a balance of access and sustainability for dental practices, the established ratio is one dentist needed for every 1,500 to 3,000 patients. Colorado is well within these parameters.
- ▶ This data indicates that Colorado's dentists should be in range of achieving the numbers required to meet Colorado's dentist workforce needs.
- ▶ These statistics again showcase that numbers alone are not a comprehensive measure of access, as the CDA recognizes that challenges in distribution of dentists in Colorado remain. Discussion about dental workforce should not simply revolve around saying "more dentists equals more access."
- ▶ Instead, we should focus on how to connect dentists to underserved communities so long-term sustainable practices are created—and dentists become engaged members of the community.

17% increase in dentists accepting Medicaid patients during the 1st year of a new adult Medicaid dental benefit

CHI's report notes that "there are signs of progress. The number of private practice dentists who treated Medicaid enrollees increased by 125 dentists, or 17%, from 2012 to 2014."

- ▶ While Colorado's total dentist numbers are growing and near sufficient to meet estimated needs, concern has been raised about the availability of dentist services to underserved populations, including Medicaid patients.
- ▶ The 17% increase in dentists participating in Medicaid is notable. Prior to addition of an adult dental benefit in 2014, Medicaid dental benefits were almost exclusively available to children. Under the prior benefit design, Medicaid was primarily applicable to providers whose practices focused on children. The dental benefit is now applicable across all age groups and can engage all dental providers. The CDA has led targeted efforts for almost two years to increase the number of providers enrolled to treat all Medicaid patients, with a focus on adding providers to serve the newly eligible adult population.
- ▶ The CDA's Medicaid provider recruitment efforts revolve around its Take 5 program, which asks the CDA's 3,000+ dentists to treat at least five Medicaid patients or families each year, especially in rural and other underserved areas. The program is designed to encourage dentists to increase their commitment to the Medicaid population over time – expanding capacity from five a year to five a month or even five a day. The CDA is committed to providing resources and support to dentists who enroll as Medicaid providers and has worked with legislators and the state Medicaid department to address barriers to provider participation. Take 5 is a long-term commitment for CDA and its members.



- ▶ The Colorado Medicaid program recently noted that there has been a 28% increase in dentists who see more than 30 Medicaid patients in their practice between the 2014 and 2015 fiscal years. In addition to increases in overall provider participation, this statistic indicates that many dentists have increased the volume of Medicaid patients seen in their offices.
- ▶ These increases in provider participation show the results of the CDA's Take 5 commitment. Strong partnerships between the CDA, HCPF, DentaQuest and other dental stakeholders have also contributed to this increase. We hope these numbers will continue to grow over the coming years as policies and programs are implemented to improve how providers work with Medicaid.
- ▶ Addressing the state's reimbursement rates for Medicaid dental procedures is key to the long-term sustainability of the dental benefit and success in further increasing provider participation rates. Medicaid reimbursement is substantially below the actual cost of many dental procedures. Despite small increases in reimbursement rates over the past two years, the CHI report notes that "Medicaid pays on average a bit less than half of the private market reimbursement rate for common preventive and treatment services." The CDA is working with the state's Joint Budget Committee to address this issue.

In Summary:

While the CDA recognizes the real access challenges faced by segments of Colorado's population, the dental community has made great strides in addressing the gaps in our state. 99% of Coloradans live in a county with a dentist. 97% of Colorado's dentist workforce needs are met. **Data indicates that Colorado's dentists should be in range, likely within a year or two, of achieving the numbers required to meet Colorado's dentist workforce needs.** Further, dentists accepting Medicaid have substantially increased in the first year of the new adult dental benefit. There is much good news and progress to celebrate, and a strong commitment by the oral health community to work to address remaining gaps.