Philanthropy Profile

Working Together for Oral Health in the Carolinas

Despite improvements in oral health status for some North Carolinians in recent decades, startling inequities exist in rural areas, for communities of color, and among low-income individuals. Poor oral health results in more than just tooth decay. It has consequences that dramatically lower quality of life and impact overall health, self-esteem, employability, and the ability to learn. Unmet dental needs consistently rank as one of the highest causes of avoidable emergency department utilization, drive demand for pain-relieving drugs, and are consistently noted as one of the greatest health challenges in communities across the state.

Yet, dramatic improvements in oral health can be achieved when preventive services are both accessible and affordable. While we at the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (Blue Cross NC) Foundation and The Duke Endowment are proud to be associated with, and support, our current grantees and the frontline stakeholders who deliver quality care to North Carolinians today, we know that poor oral health is not a challenge we can “treat our way out of.” We believe that significant and lasting improvements to oral health in North Carolina will only be possible by embracing new approaches to dramatically increase access to affordable preventive care. This work requires a multi-stakeholder commitment to change, but is achievable.

What We’ve Been Funding

Improving oral health status in North Carolina is a priority for both of our foundations, and over the past several years, we have worked with stakeholders to develop grantmaking strategies to achieve this objective. Between our 2 organizations, our approach can be summarized as promoting prevention and access to care, spreading emerging best practices, and supporting advocacy and coalition building.

Prevention and Access to Care

School-based oral health programs have proven effectiveness; however, there are barriers to widespread scaling. The Duke Endowment is funding 8 communities to implement different approaches to school-based sealant programs. The programs are employing various strategies to evaluate their comparative effectiveness, build collaborative referral practices, and demonstrate sustainable business models. Moving even further upstream in the realm of prevention, both foundations have focused a portion of our grantmaking on prevention in very young children—for example, by promoting dental visits and tooth brushing at home and in childcare settings from the emergence of the first tooth.

These longer-term strategies aside, many individuals are in pain and need care today. Promoting access to care by increasing the capacity of mission-driven dental homes is core to the strategy at our foundations, and is supported by both grantmaking and training opportunities for safety net clinics.

Spreading Emerging Best Practices

As the correlation between poor oral health and complications of chronic diseases such as diabetes becomes more evident, new approaches are being implemented across the country to increase early detection and treatment. The Duke Endowment has been working with partners in South Carolina on a demonstration program that will integrate...
dental services into a rural health system. The pilot will measure the impact of providing dental therapies to reduce inflammation in adults with uncontrolled diabetes. Meanwhile, the Blue Cross NC Foundation is supporting the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Dentistry to help dental practices implement clinical and consent protocols for silver diamine fluoride, a decay-arresting tool newly covered by Medicaid that can keep children out of the operating room for extreme dental decay.

Supporting Advocacy and Coalition Building

There is a growing recognition of the educational, economic, and health impacts of poor oral health, resulting in a broadening coalition of stakeholders committed to making improvements. Supporting a diverse network of oral health advocates, including impacted communities and clinical experts, is an important and growing part of our work. The Duke Endowment has supported a 2-state oral health research consortium comprised of faculty from the Carolinas’ 3 dental schools to identify a shared research agenda to explore policy and financing drivers to align practice with the best available evidence. Both foundations support the North Carolina Oral Health Collaborative, which takes a convening approach to accelerate implementation of policies and practices to reduce disparities.

What’s Ahead

We are proud of and remain committed to our mutual focus on oral health, and we know that much more must be done. As funders, we seek to support the implementation of evidence-based policy and practice. Improved affordability and access to preventive care would, among other positive results, decrease health care costs related to chronic disease, emergency room visits, and operating room expenses to treat extensive dental disease. Unfortunately, and despite multiple statewide task forces and long-standing consensus that improvements in oral health are achievable and necessary, much of the change needed in North Carolina has yet to be realized. The barriers that limit access to care, such as a shortage of dental providers outside of the urban parts of the state and a workforce model that relies on the presence of a dentist to deliver basic preventive care, are recognized but infrequently challenged.

National experience teaches us that policy change is the most meaningful tool to increase access to oral health services. The system of care we have today is inaccessible for too many. We believe North Carolina can meet the challenge of ensuring that anyone who calls our state home has the opportunity to be healthy, and we look forward to funding future efforts that open doors to care and decrease the disparities that exist in oral health today. NCMJ

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Acknowledgments

Potential conflicts of interest. K.E. and S.E.W. have no relevant conflicts of interest.