

North Carolina's Oral Health Strategies

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To the Editor—Oral health is a critical part of the overall health and well-being of North Carolinians, and safety-net clinics such as St. Mary Health Center play an increasingly important role in helping low-income and uninsured North Carolinians access free or low-cost emergency dental services that are in high demand and short supply. As emergency dental care has risen to the top of the priority list in many communities, charitable organizations and foundations across the state have invested in improving access to dental health providers and oral health programs in North Carolina.

While individual clinics are vital to helping individuals who are in pain and/or immediate danger from oral infection at a local level, it is important not to overlook collaborative networks as a proven strategy to address the health issues of vulnerable populations across the entire state and at critical points where disease can be prevented or treated [1, 2]. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC) Foundation is largely focused on the disparity in dental care from a broader systematic perspective. Like many philanthropic entities across the country, the BCBSNC Foundation employs outcomes-based funding that supports both collaborative systems of care and individual grantee organizations as they work together to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their initiatives. For example, this strategy is at the core of our grant investments in the North Carolina Association of Free Clinics, where increased support and technical assistance at the network level has had a profound impact on the ability of individual clinics to improve and document their outcomes, to standardize their measurements, and to receive additional funding from both local and state-wide funders.

Rather than focusing our grants solely on the local level or solely on the network level, we believe issues that impact communities across the entire state benefit from robust community funding *and* a strong collaborative network to identify and support best practices, to assist clinics in need, and to reach communities that are not being served by established health centers. Indeed, this approach appears to be the best way to ensure that the care available to our most vulnerable populations mirrors the care available to other North Carolinians. We applaud the efforts of all safety-net providers and are proud to work alongside them in improving North Carolina's dental health. NCMJ

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