



Boulder County Nonprofit Dental Aid Makes Impact Through Tele-dentistry Program for Low-income, Rural Areas.

Program ensures residents who are unable to access dental care in a traditional dental office setting, receive oral health care services.

LAFAYETTE, Colo., DECEMBER 5, 2017 — [Dental Aid](#), the area’s only nonprofit organization that supports the oral health care needs of low income adults and children, is pleased to share three impact stories on how its SMILES Dental Project program has not only improved the oral health of participants, but their overall quality of life, too.

Launched in March 2017, the [SMILES Dental Project](#) operates out of four remote sites including [Mental Health Partners](#), [Sister Carmen Community Center](#), [Bridge House](#) and [OUR Center](#). Dental Aid’s SMILES project uses collaborative, telehealth-connected dental teams to perform preventive and early intervention services for adults and children in low-income, rural areas. The teams also initiate referrals, as needed, for follow-up treatment with a dentist, thereby expanding access to dental services and improving overall health outcomes. The program delivers these services to approximately 30 patients a week.

Dental Aid is one of six organizations across Colorado selected as a SMILES Dental Project participant; it is the only such provider in Boulder and Broomfield counties.

Many adults and children – especially in low-income, rural communities – don’t visit dental offices and clinics on a regular basis due to the cost, location of services, cultural and language barriers. Without ongoing preventive care, patients suffering from pain and infections end up in emergency rooms where they rack up higher healthcare costs.

Some recent impact stories include:

- **Sally’s Story**

Sally, a Boulder county resident, found about Dental Aid’s SMILES project through Boulder-based Mental Health Partners (MHP). In her words, “My mouth pain and inability to get to, and afford, a dentist caused me to spiral downward into a place of hopelessness.” The resulting increase in her sense of fear and anxiety led to her increase her self-medication. “I was seeing my MHP counselor and she connected me to the Dental Aid hygienist that operates right there,” said Sally. Sally is now out of pain. She regularly sees the dentist, and her counselor, who sees a direct correlation between Sally’s improved well-being and access to the care provided through the Dental Aid SMILES project.

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- **Mental Health Partners Collaboration**

Toni Moon, Mental Health Partners' Director of Health Homes and Integrated Care, added "People with mental health concerns often have many significant co-occurring physical health, quality of life and social challenges." As a result, the idea of going to the dentist on a regular basis, if at all, can be an insurmountable task. "We need oral health care to come to where our people already are and address the most urgent dental concerns in the context of their daily lives. Oral health care is an important piece of their wellness that can't be ignored," she said.

Integrating oral health care into the life of a person struggling with mental health challenges is a long, intentional and important journey. Dental Aid's approach is to first introduce the patient to the dental hygienist, show them the room and equipment, talk through fear, anxiety, myths, and facts, and then rehearse. After that step is complete, an appointment is scheduled do one small procedure.

Moon added, "Over time, I've seen how the attention to oral health among those with significant mental health concerns can, and often does, lead to increased socialization, employment, interest in self-management, empowerment, improved quality of life and overall health."

- **A Bridge House client's story**

It was clear Max, a client Bridge House's resource center for the homeless, had significant dental needs when he first connected with the Dental Aid SMILES program at the center. It can be challenging for any community service organization to stay in touch with the homeless. This was the situation with Max until a former Bridge House client, now employee, helped reconnect him with Dental Aid.

The employee was able to share program details along with a message stating if Max could get to any of the program sites, Dental Aid would help him. And, to Max's credit, he sought out Dental Aid's help at their program site based at Mental Health Partners (MHP). Max made an appointment to see the Dental Aid team after his MHP counseling sessions.

As a result, some of Max's front teeth were repaired restoring Max's self-esteem and smile. Max is now working and is off of the streets! He now maintains his oral health through Dental Aid's SMILES program site at Mental Health Partners' office.

Barriers such as cost, transportation, and meeting daily needs of food and shelter, can make dental care inaccessible to struggling members of our community. The Dental Aid and Bridge House staff, as well as, his counselor at Mental Health Partners, all strongly believe

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that Max's connection to oral health never would have happened if he had to initiate his dental care on his own.

“Dental Aid believes everyone deserves to have healthy teeth and gums. Financial status should not limit anyone from receiving high quality oral health care,” said Dennis Lewis, Dental Aid president. “This program aligns with our mission to deliver quality dental care services to our area’s underserved residents who cannot get to our clinics. This grant has enabled Dental Aid to reduce many of the dental care access barriers for the underserved in Boulder and Broomfield counties.”

SMILES Dental Project is funded jointly by the [Caring for Colorado Foundation](#) and the [Colorado Health Foundation](#). “We have a long-standing commitment to improve oral health for underserved populations in Colorado,” says Chris Wiant, president and CEO of Caring for Colorado Foundation. “The SMILES Dental Project gives us the opportunity to test new and innovative ways of providing access to care for populations unable to access care through the traditional dental care system.”

About Dental Aid

Dental Aid provides compassionate, affordable, high quality dental care and education to low-income and uninsured residents of Colorado’s Boulder and Broomfield counties.

The long term clinical focus of Dental Aid follows a chronic disease management model directed at prevention, education and treatment in the early stages of disease. In addition to direct clinical care, Dental Aid prioritizes education and outreach to high-risk patients including:

- Families and children of all ages
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and HIV/AIDS
- People with physical, mental or emotional disabilities

Dental Aid was one of the first stand-alone, nonprofit, complete-care dental clinics in the U.S. The organization was founded in 1974 as a referral organization and opened its first full-service clinic in 1980. Today, Dental Aid provides dental care to more than 8,000 children and adults annually. It provides services through three clinics (Boulder, Longmont and Louisville, CO) and a satellite clinic at the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless. In addition, portable dental equipment is used to bring dental care to the homebound or those living in long term care facilities. For more information, visit www.dentalaid.org.

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SMILES Dental Project is funded jointly by Caring for Colorado Foundation www.caringforcolorado.org and the Colorado Health Foundation. www.coloradohealth.org. To learn more, visit the SMILES blog at www.caringforcolorado.blogspot.com.

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