HRSA’s Health Center Program Fact Sheet
America’s Primary Care Safety Net Working to Address Oral Health

For more than 50 years, health centers have delivered comprehensive, high-quality, cost-effective primary health care to patients regardless of their ability to pay. Health centers advance the health home model of coordinated, comprehensive, and patient-centered care, providing a wide range of medical, dental, behavioral health, and enabling services. In 2016, nearly 1,400 health centers operated over 11,000 service delivery sites, providing care in every U.S. state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Pacific Basin and serving nearly 26 million patients. Nearly half of all health centers serve rural populations. Health centers serve a diverse patient population, including more than 60% of whom are racial or ethnic minorities. About 23% of health center patients are uninsured and 70% are at or below the 100% federal poverty level.

The Surgeon General’s landmark report Oral Health in America brought national attention to the importance of and disparities present in oral health. Furthermore, the 2011 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report Improving Access to Oral Health Care for Vulnerable and Underserved Populations stated that unmet oral health care needs faced by these populations cannot be neglected given the connection between oral health and overall health. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Oral Health Strategic Framework, 2014-2017 outlined oral health priorities and current and planned activities across HHS and its federal partners to eliminate oral health disparities and improve oral health across HHS and its federal partners.

**Oral Health and the Health Center Program**

Oral health is integral to overall health and well-being. Untreated dental caries can cause pain and infection that may lead to numerous problems with eating, speaking, sleeping, learning, and attending school or work. Although progress has been made to decrease dental caries over the past four decades, disparities remain among certain population groups including children, uninsured, low-income, and racial/ethnic minorities. In addition, there are 5,667 dental professional shortage areas in the U.S. with 54.9 million people living in them.

HRSA-supported health centers continue to support increased access to oral health in the communities they serve.

- 91% of health centers provide preventive dental services either directly or via contract with dental providers.

According to 2016 Uniform Data System (UDS) data, health centers reported the following:

- 5.7 million dental patients served
- 48.7% of children 6-9 years of age at elevated caries risk received dental sealants on at least one permanent first molar
- 4,474 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) dentists and 2,200 FTE dental hygienists are working at health centers
HRSA’s Bureau of Primary Health Care (BPHC) Activities in Support of Oral Health

HRSA’s BPHC remains committed to increasing access to high-quality, oral health in all communities via three strategic goals:

1. **Increase access to oral health care for underserved communities and vulnerable populations**
   - 420 health center grantees received an Oral Health Service Expansion award in FY 2016 to increase oral health services

2. **Advance health center quality and impact**
   - As of July 2017, 68% of health centers are Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH) recognized. The PCMH is a primary care model which includes: providing comprehensive, coordinated, patient centered care through a multidisciplinary care team, enabling access to care, advancing patient experience through shared decision making, utilizing performance measurement for quality improvement and meeting social, cultural, and linguistic patient needs. The PCMH framework facilitates oral health-and primary care integration and includes oral health specific standards
   - Introduction of the first oral health measure for dental sealants to UDS 2015 with a first year baseline that exceeded the HP2020 goal and an improvement of 6.3 percentage points in 2016
   - Awarded a three-year national cooperative agreement to the National Network for Oral Health Access (NNOHA) to provide oral health training and technical assistance to health centers

3. **Optimize BPHC operations to enhance understanding of workforce and methods of care delivery**
   - 2016 UDS reporting changes included additional reporting of dental therapists and telehealth used to provide oral health services

Oral Health Resources

**General Information and Technical Assistance for Health Centers**

- HRSA Oral Health: [https://www.hrsa.gov/oral-health/](https://www.hrsa.gov/oral-health/)
- ECRI Resource Page: Dental Services and Oral Health: [https://www.ecri.org/components/HRSA/Pages/DentalServices.aspx](https://www.ecri.org/components/HRSA/Pages/DentalServices.aspx)

This publication lists non-federal resources in order to provide additional information to consumers. The views and content in these resources have not been formally approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) or the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Neither HHS nor HRSA endorses the products or services of the listed resources.

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4. Ibid., p. 2.
5. IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council), *op. cit.*, p. 2.
7. Snapshot Summary – Form 5A Services Scope Repository Data as of 12/31/2016