

Smiles for Life Senior Dental Access Program

Multiple locations throughout Washington



Anita with Bellingham patient

Program Overview

Smiles for Life is a preventive oral health program that provides lower-income older adults without health insurance an affordable alternative for routine oral health services and connects them to comprehensive dental care. Participants receive free head, neck, and oral health screenings, as well as free classes such as “Oral Health Care for Older Adults” and “Becoming a Savvy Health Care Consumer.” Dental cleanings and fluoride applications are available at a low cost.

Program History and Development

After discovering that access to dental services was one of the top five health care concerns among seniors in Clallam County, Washington, the Smiles for Life program model was established in 2006. The first two programs began as pilots in Bellingham and Bainbridge Island, Washington, and function as models for other sites. A one-day intensive training session in Bellingham provides the foundation for dental hygienists to inform them about the program model, the equipment and supply side of costs to start the program, and the processes for delivery of traditional dental hygiene services in untraditional settings. Hygienists also learn how to market their programs, recruit potential clients, build partnerships in the community, and contract with a consulting dentist for their programs. There are now over 40 programs throughout Washington

State at senior and community centers. Services are offered one to three times per month, with clinic hours dependent on location. Referrals to partnering dental providers are also provided.

Program Sustainability

This program provides preventive dental services to older adults covered by Medicaid or for an out-of-pocket cost. ^{SEP}

Washington Dental Service Foundation provided initial startup funding for six hygienists in 2009. The programs are ^{SEP}independently operated by licensed dental hygienists. ^{SEP}

The annual budget depends on paid staff support or sole hygienist operation and ranges from \$2,000 to \$3,500.

Program Impact

To date, Smiles for Life has provided dental services to over 4,000 individuals. According to a study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Smiles for Life reduced costs of the target population and satisfied the client's need for preventive oral health services.¹

Reports from all senior center programs were sent quarterly to the Washington State Department of Health from 2007 to 2009 on demographics, client satisfaction, number of individuals served, services provided, and referrals to other healthcare providers. Surveys demonstrated high client satisfaction, increased oral health education levels, and improved self-care.

Outcomes of the program include an increased number of older adults who received affordable and high quality preventive oral health services, increased oral health and consumer knowledge, and an increased number of older adults linked to dentists for additional care.

Smiles for Life was recognized as number nine in the top 25 innovative and preventive oral health programs in the United States by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Program Contact Information

Kindred Associates, PLLC: 360-306-3602

Annual trainings and funding information available through the Washington Dental Hygienists Association and Anita Rodriguez, RDH, BSDH.

- ¹ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (September 2013). Dental Professionals in Non-Dental Settings. Retrieved from:
<http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2013/09/dental-professionals-in-non-dental-settings.html>