



Dental School-Based, Non-Urgent Needs Approach to Re-establishing Long-term Health care for Veterans

Kaitlyn Cardenas, BS; Adam Yang, BS; Jake Cantrell, BS, MS; Anita Nasser, BS; Jennifer Candiano, BS; Steffany Chamut, DDS, MPH, FICD

INTRODUCTION

- Oral diseases have long been overlooked and are now considered a silent epidemic
- Maintaining oral health is essential to achieving overall health and well-being, as it enables vital daily functions such as eating and speaking, and confers a good quality of life without pain, discomfort, and embarrassment
- Yet, dental care benefits are still restricted and limited, posing a constant challenge for certain groups in the United States (U.S.), including Veterans (6% of the U.S. population) due to a lack of insurance
- Veterans experience higher rates of periodontitis, missing teeth, and filled teeth, even when controlling for chronic medical conditions and smoking status
- Only 15% of Veterans qualify for dental services through Veterans Affairs (VA), resulting in substantial unmet dental needs
- The delivery of accessible, comprehensive healthcare to Veterans is a concern deserving attention to achieve equity in oral and overall health.

OBJECTIVE

To improve long-term access to dental care for Veterans, identify barriers to care, and raise Veterans' awareness of oral health and dental coverage options through a student-led intervention, "Give Veterans a Smile (GVAS)".

METHODS

The "GVAS" was held in 2021 and 2022 at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine (HSDM). The event was funded by the Harvard COOP grant and planned by a team of dental students with HSDM faculty support. GVAS was advertised through the Boston VA, Healthcare for All, and local organizations, and provided free dental exams, x-rays, treatment plans, and cleanings. Written consent was obtained to conduct the "Dental Needs Assessment Survey," verbal qualitative interviews, and chart reviews to assess patients' data on dental needs and experiences accessing dental care.

RESULTS

Over 2 GVAS events (2021-2022), a total of 44 patients received free oral care in six hours of clinic time.

DISCUSSION

The GVAS event at HSDM demonstrates how a student-led, school-based outreach event can improve oral health access, knowledge, and oral health literacy for vulnerable communities, like Veterans. This model aimed to increase long-term dental care access focusing on diagnostic, preventative, and social services connecting Veterans to a dental home.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Dental schools and students are uniquely situated to solve public health challenges by providing comprehensive dental services, accepting a variety of insurances, and providing care at below-market rates.

- **School Collaboration and Model Adoption:** Encouraging more schools to host similar events that prioritize disease prevention and patient retention can increase dental care access and shift away from unsustainable models that focused only on meeting patients' acute needs.
- **Impact on Dental Education:** Participation in GVAS enhances dental education by exposing students to public health challenges, geriatric dentistry, and vulnerable patient populations, thus improving their attitudes and preparedness for care delivery and developing competencies in critical thinking and active learning.

Survey Question	Respondents (N=26) %
In the last 12 months...	
Did you or a dentist believe you needed any dental care, tests, or treatments?	62%
Were you unable to get dental care, tests, or treatments that you or a dentist believed necessary?	62%
Were you delayed in getting dental care, tests, or treatment you or a dentist believed necessary?	62%
Have you had a dental visit?	31%
Are you currently enrolled in a dental insurance?	38%
Have you ever...	
Checked your eligibility for dental benefits through VA?	65%
Checked your eligibility for MassHealth?	27%
Had an exam for oral cancer in which the doctor or dentist pull son your tongue, feels under the tongue or inside the cheeks?	50%
Are any of your missing teeth replaced by full or partial dentures, false teeth, dental implants, bridges, or dental plates?	46%
Did problems with your mouth interfere with your...	
Ability to eat or chew due to oral pain or discomfort?	38%
Ability to work?	8%
Ability to sleep?	19%
Social activities?	4%
Usual activities at home?	8%

Table 1. Survey Results from 2021 and 2022 Written Questionnaire

A single-day outreach event connected in-need Veterans to long-term dental homes



REFERENCE: CareQuest Institute for Oral Health. Veteran Oral Health: Expanding Access and Equity.

CONTACT: kaitlyn_cardenas@hsdm.harvard.edu