Increased Access to Oral Health Care through Community Expansions of School-Based Dental Programs

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BACKGROUND

- Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in children and can lead to pain, infection, difficulty eating and speaking, poor sleep, and declines in school performance and attendance.[1]
- In 2020, Florida had the highest rate of ED NTDC visits for children aged 14 and below (26.7 per 100,000 people).[2]
- In Alachua County, FL, 39.5% of third graders had untreated tooth decay, significantly higher than the statewide average of 29%.[3,4]
- The UFCD Department of Community Dentistry and Behavioral Science operates a school-based dental sealant program, providing preventive dental services to students in Title 1 elementary and middle schools.
- Despite these preventive services, children in the program continue to face challenges in accessing care for unmet dental needs.
- In 2021, funding support allowed for the development of the Saving Smiles Program, expanding services to community-based settings and increasing capacity to treat tooth decay and urgent dental needs in pediatric patients.

STUDY AIMS

- To investigate outcomes from expanding school-based dental outreach programs to community-based settings.
- To examine how this expansion impacts access to dental care for Alachua County children.

METHODS

- The study was approved as Exempt by the UF Institutional Review Board (IRB202500517).
- Patient data from the UFCD school-based dental sealant program and the UFCD Saving Smiles program were retrospectively reviewed from September 2021 – May 2024.
- R version 4.4.1 was used for statistical analyses. Frequency distributions were calculated, and descriptive analyses were performed to summarize sample characteristics.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Saving Smiles Patients, 2021 - 2024

Demographic Variables	School Year 2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Appointments; n	127	241	399
Age; mean (SD)	9.8 (6.2)	8.7 (4.3)	9.0 (4.5)
Sex; n (%)			
Male	64 (50.4%)	114 (47.3%)	204 (51.1%)
Female	63 (49.6%)	127 (52.7%)	195 (48.9%)
Race; n (%)			
White	47 (37.0%)	68 (28.2%)	150 (37.6%)
Black	59 (46.5%)	135 (56.0%)	161 (40.4%)
Asian	6 (4.7%)	7 (2.9%)	16 (4.0%)
Hawaiin/ Pacific Islander	4 (3.1%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Multiracial	8 (6.3%)	21 (8.7%)	51 (12.8%)
Other	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (1.8%)
Unknown	1 (0.8%)	9 (3.7%)	14 (3.5%)
Hispanic Ethnicity; n (%)	21 (16.5%)	22 (9.1%)	108 (27.1%)

Figure 3: Number of Appointments in School-Based and Community-Based Outreach, 2021 - 2024

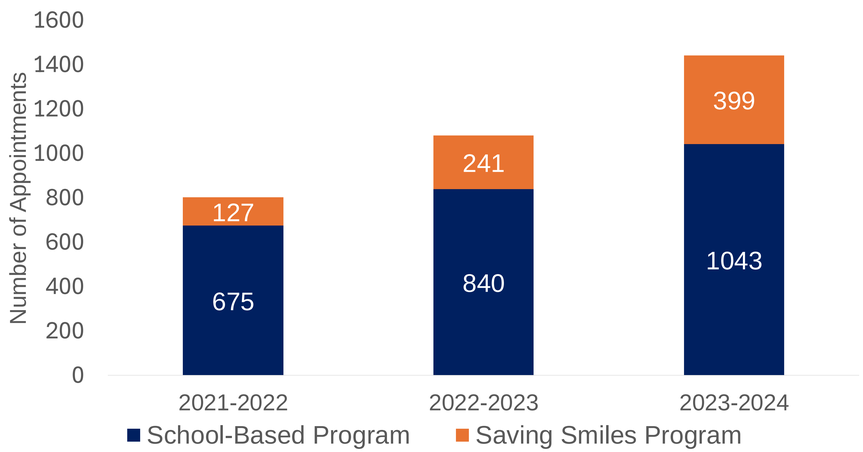


Figure 1: Saving Smiles Patient Referral Sources, 2021 - 2024

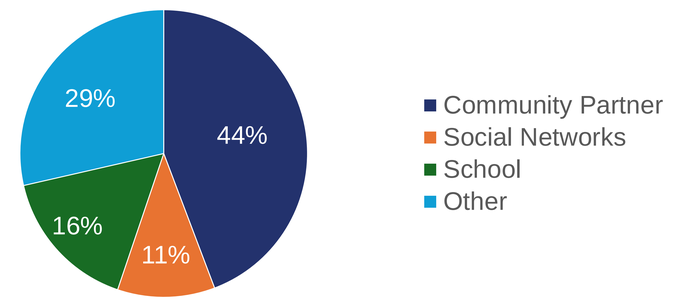
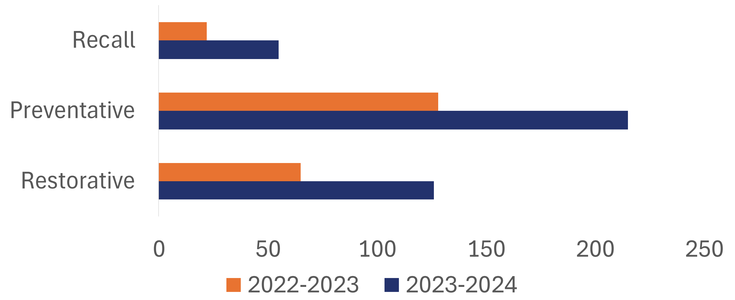


Figure 2: Number and Types of Treatments Received in Saving Smiles Program, 2022 - 2024



CONCLUSIONS

- Extending school-based dental programs to community-based settings helps address unmet needs for children at high-risk for dental problems.
- Engaging community partners in these efforts fosters greater awareness and support for oral health promotion programs.

REFERENCES

1. U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services. (2021). Oral health in America: Advances and challenges.
2. CareQuest Institute for Oral Health. (2023). Spotlight on Florida: Children's use of emergency departments for non-traumatic dental conditions.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- For more information on the UFCD Saving Smile Program, please scan this QR code.