Healthy Mouths, Brighter Futures: Oral Health for the Unhoused in Orange County, NC

Maisy Miller*, Sarah Lindsay Liebkemann (mentor)
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Adams School of Dentistry, United States

Background:
Dental care is one of the most common unmet medical needs reported by unhoused individuals nationally.[1] To improve dental care access, programs should focus on multidisciplinary collaboration, service location considerations, and integrating oral health education, while also exploring the role of non-dental practitioners in delivering care.[2]



~1 in 1,110 NC residents
experienced homelessness in 2023.[3]

Purpose:
To establish sustainable local partnerships to provide free dental care, dental home connections, and oral hygiene instructions/supplies to individuals experiencing homelessness in Orange County, NC.

Methods:

Phase 1	• Began community needs assessment • Timeline and partnership establishment
Phase 2	• Pilot program development
Phase 3	• Supply collection, barrier and attitude assessment, & material development
Phase 4	• H4H education and integration
Phase 5	• Planning for dental care delivery

This initiative seeks to improve access to dental care for the unhoused population in Orange County, North Carolina by addressing barriers through sustainable partnerships that emphasize community-based, person-centered approaches.

He expressed fear that he wouldn't wake up if they put him to sleep for the procedure, saying
"They'll chain me down."
This distrust stems from an experience of having previously been placed in a strait jacket in the hospital setting. He then, somewhat jokingly, added,
"If I could just smoke a cigarette before they put me under, I'd be fine."

Resources developed:

1) Baggett, T. P., et al. The unmet health care needs of homeless adults: a national study. J. Public Health Dent. 2010; 70(4), 269-277.
2) Paisi M, Kay E, Plessas A, et al. Barriers and enablers to accessing dental services for people experiencing homelessness: A systematic review. *Community Dent Oral Epidemiol*. 2019; 47: 103–111. https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1111/cdoe.12444
3) State of Homelessness: 2024 Edition - Endhomelessness.org [Internet]. National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2024. Available from: https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness

Results:

Supplies Donated	
Toothbrush, Toothpaste, & Floss	32 each
Printed Dental Home Resource	60
Total Screeners trained on OHI	35

Trends identified from unhoused individuals:
- Feelings of fear or distrust regarding the medical system.
- Lack of knowledge or awareness about the importance of oral health.
- Asset-based problem solving.

Discussion:
Key lessons:
- Importance of partnerships, interprofessional collaboration, and sustainability.
- Flexibility and resilience.

Obstacles:
- Obtaining supplies.
- Varying needs of unhoused individuals.

Updates and Future Directions:
- Maintaining relationships with current partners.
- Partnership created with the Orange County Health Department and the UNC-CH chapter of AAPHD.
- June or August delivery of free dental care including cleanings, extractions, and referrals.

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