

West Virginia Uses Collaborative Approach to Overcome Oral Health Barriers

“Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work. People who work together will win, whether it be against complex football defenses or the problems of modern society.”

Vince Lombardi

The dedicated participants in the West Virginia Partners for Oral Health understand the significance of group effort. In fact, they work to build relationships within the group that support a common purpose. The members of the coalition value one another and have agreed to put personal agendas aside in order to accomplish the common goal of improving the oral health status of the children in the state.

Executive Director of the West Virginia Head Start Association Becky Gooch-Erbacher noticed that oral health kept surfacing as the primary need for Head Start children, and began working collaboratively with a group of concerned individuals and organizations to address that need.

In 2004, the West Virginia Head Start Association received grant funds from the Association of State and Territorial Dentists to hold an oral health forum. This forum resulted in the identification of the major barriers to oral health access and utilization in West Virginia. After the forum, a core group of individuals and organizations continued to meet to develop strategies for overcoming these barriers. This group eventually formed the West Virginia Partners for Oral Health.

The West Virginia Partners for Oral Health coalition has been effective in addressing access and utilization barriers throughout the state because of the dedication of individual member organizations and their willingness to work collaboratively to improve the oral health of West Virginia children. According to Gooch-Erbacher, “When we are confronted with an issue, it really doesn’t matter if we agree or disagree. We ask ourselves three questions: Is it good for the kids? Is it good for the parents? Does it meet Head Start Performance Standards?”

One important partner in the Partnership is The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation. To demonstrate its commitment to improving oral health in West Virginia, the Foundation has funded 21 grants on oral health for a total of \$2,754,250. The foundation strives to coordinate the efforts of its grantees. Beverly Railey Robinson, vice president for Programs for the Foundation, takes on an active role in promoting collaboration both through her participation in West Virginia Partners for Oral Health and through individual contacts with grantees. According to Robinson, **“The relationships make the difference!”**

As a leader in the Partnership, Robinson recognizes that it is important for the team to support one another and for the group to take a long-range view of the issues. This systems approach to change has resulted in the emergence of strong leadership and good relationships among the partnership members. In recognition of the importance of open discussion, she supports members who need to bring up difficult issues – encouraging those who could be great leaders.

The group utilizes an orchestrated approach to reach legislators and policy makers to advocate for policy changes that will lead to increased access. At the same time, members of the partnership lead activities to reach parents with important information about oral care and prevention. Additionally, they value provider input – a number of dentists are at the table in the Partnership, all of which have been in private practice.

In 2006, the Benedum Foundation provided funding for a face-to-face survey of local dentists. A significant portion of those who participated stated a willingness to help solve the access problem and treat

children. Barriers to participation in the Medicaid system for West Virginia providers included difficulty getting paid for services through a complicated Medicaid reimbursement system and concern over a high rate of no shows in that patient population. Other surveys and interviews revealed that parents were often unaware of the importance of dental care for very young children and that they were uninformed about practices that promote oral health in young children.

In an effort to extend messages related to the importance of oral health to parents, Benedum Foundation facilitated the development of relationships with a variety of organizations that have not traditionally focused on oral health. These include:

- **Mountaineer Food Bank:** Food banks distributed oral health informational posters to families accessing their food banks throughout the state.
- **Children’s Home and Aid Society:** Increased awareness of oral health to foster families,
- **Domestic violence shelters:** Many women and children present with dental problems when they access domestic violence services, offering a window of opportunity to increase access and awareness in this population
- **Council of Churches:** The Council offers the opportunity to engage and inform a broad spectrum of stakeholders as it provides a forum for diverse organizations to discuss, coordinate and collaborate on issues that improve the health and well-being of West Virginia children.





Head Start children are required to brush their teeth each day at school.

- **Oral Health Educators:** Educators based in the Office of Maternal, Child and Family Health provide information about good oral health practices to children in public schools in 38 counties throughout the state, including children in Head Start programs.

West Virginia Head Start centers have long worked with local providers to ensure that the children enrolled in their programs received needed dental care. Head Start centers throughout the state incorporate oral health into the curriculum on a regular basis and provide educational opportunities to staff and families.

The dedication demonstrated by Head Start centers throughout West Virginia to improving the oral health of their children is shared by the dental community throughout the state. According to West Virginia State Dental Director Dr. David Walker, many WV dentists have participated in events such as Mission of Mercy and Give Kids a Smile in the past.

“There is no question that our children need healthy teeth to be confident, to be healthy, and to grow into strong adults. To achieve that goal, we need to provide all kids with access to dental screening, care and information. That goes to the heart of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Head Start Dental Home Initiative, and it puts a smile on my face knowing more children are getting the healthy start in life they deserve.”

Senator Jay Rockefeller

Head Start programs and dentists in West Virginia maintain the common goal of improved oral health for the state’s children. Both communities understand the importance of collaboration to attaining this goal and welcome the AAPD Head Start Dental Home Initiative as a critical component to the development of mutually beneficial local partnerships composed of Head Start staff and families and local dentists and their staffs.

According to Gooch-Erbacher, the peer-to-peer concept that is the cornerstone of the AAPD Head Start Dental Home Initiative is integral to the process. Partnership members appreciate the ability of the state leader to not only engage the dental community, but also to relay the perspective of that community to the group. This connection was emphasized at the AAPD Head Start Dental Home Initiative state launch, which was attended by a representative from each of the 11 component dental societies throughout the state.

The joint efforts of the Partnership and the initiative have also resulted in legislative support for the activities of both. The First Lady of West Virginia, Gayle Manchin, has taken on the initiative as a special project. Legislative support for the initiative is nicely summed up by the following quote from West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller:

What makes an effective coalition?

According to the members of the West Virginia Partners for Oral Health, a successful coalition depends upon:

- **Recognition of a common goal:** the coalition has agreed to make children’s oral health a priority
- **Respect:** members are respectful of one another and value the strengths and experience that each member brings to the coalition
- **Transparency:** the group has made a conscious effort to agree to disagree – they don’t suppress discussion just because not everyone is in agreement over a particular issue. Members are free to state their opinions openly, knowing that the rest of the group will respect their opinion, even if they don’t agree with it
- **Communication:** Open and ongoing communication between coalition members is seen as key in
- **Great facilitation:** group facilitators allow the group process to occur and make sure that everyone has a voice.



WV Dental Association
 WV Dental Hygiene Association
 WVU School of Dentistry
 Healthy Kids and Families
 WV Head start Association
 Eastern Panhandle Healthy Smiles Coalition
 West Virginia Community Voices, Inc.
 Valley Health Systems
 Rush2Brush
 WV Public Health Association/Dental Section
 WV Dental Assistants Association
 WV Academy of General Dentistry
 WV Council of Churches
 WV Association of Free Clinics
 WV Primary Care Association
 Sisters of Saint Joseph Charitable Fund
 Marshall University School
 Health Technical Assistance Center
 West Virginians for Affordable Health Care
 Cardiac Kinder Dental Program
 WVU Extension Service