

Oral Health Foundation *UPDATE*

Oral Health *Foundation*
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About Philanthropy

By Ralph Fuccillo

From time to time, I am asked, "How do you know your philanthropic activity is making a difference?"

In answering the question, I have to focus on several truths that guide our work: no disease is as widespread as childhood cavities. Remarkably, this disease is 90% preventable. However, it is a complex problem with multiple causes. Our grantmaking elevates awareness of the preventability of this disease, increases access, and emphasizes collaborations so proven prevention services can be brought to areas where they are most needed. By focusing our investments on systems, we believe we can make the greatest difference in alleviating the unnecessary suffering that accompanies a preventable disease.

Often our investments are small drops in a large pool of need. But they make a tangible difference in changing the course of disease for thousands. In this communication, we're highlighting two success stories where Foundation funding made a real difference in access for thousands in the inner city neighborhoods of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and thousands more in the equivalently challenged rural area of South Berkshire County.

As a Foundation, we have an obligation to play a leadership role in working for better oral health. Systems change is a big goal that takes the attention and resources of many stakeholders, from clinics to providers, policy makers, and community organizers. We know we are most successful when many

advocates work together for a common goal. We were able to do this in June, when hundreds of oral health advocates from all over the state joined us in creating the Better Oral Health for Massachusetts Coalition. Foundation leadership is making a difference in focusing the state on a critical health goal.

Coalition Forms for Better Oral Health for Massachusetts

Oral health providers, advocates, legislators, policy makers, and community leaders in Massachusetts gathered in Sturbridge, MA, on June 4 and 5, 2008, to take up the challenge of the U.S. Surgeon General's National Call to Action to Promote Oral Health and begin development of a practical and inclusive oral health plan for Massachusetts. It is the first time that a coalition of this depth was convened to shape a comprehensive statewide initiative that specifically focuses on eliminating oral health disparities.

The **Oral Health Foundation** collaborated with **Partners for a Healthier Community** in assembling a strong coalition for this historic effort. We were joined by a robust collective of leading voices in health in Massachusetts: the **Massachusetts Dental Society**, the **Massachusetts Department of Public Health**, **Delta Dental of Massachusetts**, and the **Massachusetts Dental Hygienists' Association**. Also lending support are **Doral USA**, the **Massachusetts Medical Association**, the **Justice Resource Institute**, the **Massachusetts Oral Health Advocacy Task Force**, and the **Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers**.

The Summit follows the January 2008 release of the **Catalyst Institute's** report "The Oral Health of Massachusetts Children," funded by **Delta Dental of Massachusetts**. The Catalyst Institute research showed that significant disparities persist in children's oral health status among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

The work of the Coalition supports Massachusetts' statewide agenda to address oral health disparities. Over the course of the next year, working groups will form to document specific activities to promote oral health, prevent disease, and ultimately close gaps in care for children, seniors, and other underserved populations. The Oral Health Foundation has committed its support to the statewide effort which is expected to take several years and has hired [Biyi Ogunjimi](#) BDS, MPH to facilitate information sharing for this large geographically dispersed group. A Web site supports the evolution of the effort at www.massoralhealth.org.

Oral Health Foundation (OHF) Funding Improves Access to Services

As in most states, minorities, the poor, the uninsured, rural families, and persons in relatively poor health in Massachusetts experience the greatest barriers in access to dental services. The ability to get care is impacted by the availability and geographic distribution of dentists and, in particular, the number and distribution of dentists who accept MassHealth (Medicaid). The Catalyst Institute's Massachusetts Oral Health Report 2006 identified 69 cities and towns that have no dentist and found that more than 50 percent of cities and towns in Massachusetts are without a dentist who accepts MassHealth.

Moving from defining a community need to having a licensed facility takes time. In 2008, the Oral Health Foundation saw the seeds planted by grant funding in 2005 develop into new fully licensed dental clinics, serving very diverse populations: homeless and inner city residents of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and the rural communities in the southwestern corner of the state.

St. Luke's Clinic in Lawrence, a program of Lazarus House Ministries, a homeless/transition shelter, provides food, job training, transitional housing, medical and dental services, and other programming to individuals in Merrimack Valley. According to the 2000 census, the median family income in Lawrence is half the Massachusetts average, the proportion of the population below the poverty level (24%) is more than 2.5 times the state average, and almost one in three children under 18 (32%) live in poverty. A recent study found that 26% of the overall adult population is uninsured and 36% of the adult Hispanic population (the majority demographic in the city) is uninsured.

The opening of a fully staffed two-chair dental clinic at Lazarus House is an example of the power of collaboration. Limited dental services were being delivered by volunteer dentists and hygienists using donated dental equipment and supplies. An Oral Health Foundation grant provided funding for the planning as well as the renovation, licensing, and startup of a permanent clinic. Professional services were provided by the **Boston University Goldman School of Dentistry**. The clinic opened in May, 2008, with a long waiting list of clients and the community at large, including families, individuals, and children. Patient visits are expected to increase from 550 to more than 3,000 annually.



(photo above) Ralph Fuccillo, President of the Oral Health Foundation (OHF); Lessette Torres, Hygienist; Dr. Miguel Tabares, Dentist; Judi Foley, Sr. Program Manager, OHF

On the other side of the state, **Community Health Programs (CHP) of Great Barrington** had, for the 30 years of its existence, been keenly aware

of a great need for affordable, accessible dental care in the rural towns of South Berkshire County. CHP outreach workers found that statewide health care changes had virtually eliminated dental coverage for adults in the area. Many area towns have no dentist at all. The nearest dental clinic is 55 minutes north in Pittsfield.



Dental medicine planning for this dental clinic began in 2000 when CHP became a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), a change that enabled it to expand its programs and seek new funding. With support from the UMass Medical School's Office of Community Programs, CHP hired the Catalyst Institute's Safety Net

Solutions consultants to explore financially appropriate models for dental care. Funds from the Oral Health Foundation enabled CHP to launch a comprehensive program of oral health outreach and education for South Berkshire County that included a five-chair fully licensed dental clinic. CHP patients now receive preventive and restorative care on premises along with linguistically and culturally appropriate education on oral hygiene. There is no doubt of the need: the dental clinic opened in June 2008 with a waiting list of 1,500 individuals.

(photo above) Community Health Programs of Great Barrington Grand Opening: Ralph Fuccillo, Oral Health Foundation President, Elizabeth Cardona, Office for Governor Deval Patrick, Marcia Savage, CHP Executive Director, Dr. Monica Torrenegra, CHP Dentist, State Representative William "Smitty" Pignatelli, Laura Teicher, District Aide for State Senator Benjamin B. Downing, U.S. Congressman John W. Olver, Susan Santora, CHP President.

Oral Health Disparities in Rural Communities

The commonly held view is that health status and access disparities correlate strongly with socioeconomic factors. Less recognized is the fact that rural residents experience disparities for different reasons:

- Reduced exposure to fluoride through consumption of bottled water and private well water. Town well systems are less likely to be fluoridated.
- A high proportion of children in rural regions have Medicaid coverage. Fewer have private insurance for dental services than in metropolitan areas. State data indicate that 70% of children on MassHealth receive no dental care.
- There is a documented dearth of dentists located in rural Massachusetts, and few accept MassHealth patients.
- Many residents in rural areas hold seasonal, low-wage, and part-time jobs serving the agriculture, tourist, and second-homeowner industries. These jobs rarely offer health insurance. For those

- employers who do offer benefits, few include dental insurance.
- Many rural areas are designated a Medically Underserved Population Area and a Health Professionals Shortage Area.
- There are few or no school-based health centers; this contributes to the lack of parental understanding of the critical importance of early dental care.

Growth

The Oral Health Foundation is please to welcome Tracy Garland and Brenda Lavasta.

Tracy Garland joined the Foundation as Senior Advisor. Previously, Garland had been president and chief executive officer of the Washington Dental Service Foundation, where her philanthropic and public policy work led to the expansion of community fluoridation programs and demonstrable increases in access to dental services for underserved children and adults. Garland has a national reputation as a progressive reformer and is known for her signature approach to strategic thinking as the cornerstone for philanthropic work. The Foundation looks forward to her expertise in constituency building and her visionary leadership which will be incorporated into strategic programming and outreach activities.

Brenda Lavasta joined the Foundation as Grants Management Associate. Previously, she was a Diversity Fellow at the Rhode Island Foundation through the Associated Grant Makers Diversity Fellowship in Philanthropy. The fellowship program aims to inspire the next generation of philanthropic leaders among people of color by offering training and support to a select group of passionate, emerging professionals. Brenda began her career in the Executive Education Department at the Harvard Business School where she held various roles. She received a dual degree in Management and Finance from Simmons College and an MBA from Suffolk University.

Boston's South End Community Health Center Honors Ralph Fuccillo as Health Care Hero

Oral Health Foundation President Ralph Fuccillo was honored for leadership in advancing preventive health care and reducing health disparities in emerging populations. An advocate for social justice in disease prevention and health promotion, Fuccillo has focused on the social determinants of health, whether dealing with injury and violence, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, or issues of access to health care.

At the Oral Health Foundation, Fuccillo has turned his attention to eliminating large





disparities in access to quality oral health care and the prevalence of dental disease. As the largest U.S. funder solely focused on oral health, the Oral Health Foundation is committed to improving the oral health of every underserved resident in the state.

Fuccillo currently serves on several nonprofit boards, including the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, Elderhostel, the Massachusetts Dental Society Foundation, Neighborhood Health Plan, and Funders Concerned About AIDS. He is past president of the Massachusetts Health Council Board of Directors and past president of the AIDS Action Committee Board of Directors.

The mission of the Oral Health Foundation is to support and promote optimal oral health. We believe that as the largest funder solely focused on oral health in the U.S., we have the opportunity and a responsibility to provide leadership in improving oral health. Learn more about the Oral Health Foundation, at www.oralhealthfoundation.com.