



Dientes will provide dental services for underserved communities' needs.

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In the first months of the [pandemic](#), Dientes Community Dental Care was forced to close its clinics throughout Santa Cruz County. The nonprofit, which aims to give people access to high-quality, affordable oral health care, had initially not been considered essential.

For more than two months they had to work with a skeleton crew, and only for emergency care. They lost revenue and were forced to lay off and furlough employees.

Thankfully, Dientes was eventually allowed to reopen in summer 2020. They were approved for the second round of the Paycheck Protection

Program, and as of now are back to about 90% of services they had pre-Covid.

“We’ve seen an amazing outpouring of support from our community,” said Sheree Storm, Chief Development Officer for Dientes. “It’s been a tough year for everyone. But we are super happy to be back—serving patients all over the county.”

Dientes has also been able to restart its Outreach Days, which would normally be held at more than 30 locations across the county, including schools, juvenile hall and homeless shelters. Pop-up clinics are set up at the different sites, offering dental exams, X-rays, fluoride varnish, cleanings and sealants.

In addition, staff refers patients to one of the main clinics if they need additional treatments, such as for cavities.

Dientes worked closely with the County Office of Education to host two Outreach Days at Sequoia High School in Watsonville earlier this month, serving low-income students grades K-5 through pre-scheduled appointments.

“Going out to schools is so important because the kids, for many reasons, are not making it into the dentist,” Storm said. “Usually it’s about transportation. Parents just can’t get them there, or they’re working, or live far away without a car.”

Another reason is cost. Dental care is expensive and often not covered by health insurance. For instance, seniors on Medicare don’t receive dental coverage and are often burdened by costly procedures. This could be prevented, Storm said, if only they had a good foundation of oral health to start with.

“Prevention is not just about treatment,” she said. “You need to get kids early, to teach them better oral health habits ... so they’re not looking back and having the same problems that seniors now face.”

The next Outreach Day is scheduled for May 8 in Santa Cruz, at Branciforte Small Schools Campus, 840 North Branciforte Ave. To make an appointment call 831-716-5926.

Dientes continues to work with dentists, educational institutions, and various organizations and agencies across the county and state, including Cabrillo College, First 5 Santa Cruz County, Salud Para La Gente and the Central California Alliance For Health. Together, they focus on campaigns to educate parents on the importance of oral health for their children, and help families better access quality services.

And soon Dientes will be able to expand their own services further. A new [health and housing campus at 1500 Capitola Road](#) will include a clinic for Dientes, a facility for Santa Cruz Community Health, along with 57 affordable housing units developed by MidPen Housing. The six-building complex is being built by Bogard Construction and designed by Wald, Ruhnke & Dost Architects.

The health facilities are expected to be completed by sometime in 2022, and the housing by 2023. Storm said they hope to break ground very soon.

“It’s really exciting,” she said. “We were expecting it to get going a year ago, but we had to pause due to Covid. Now we’re really ready.”

Dental care, Storm said, is a vital part of health care that should be accessible to everyone.

“Your mouth is an internal part of your body,” she said. “There is a direct relationship between oral and heart health. Oral health is linked to better pregnancy outcomes, to the ability to speak clearly. And it is so much about confidence, relationships with other people... Everyone deserves to have a healthy smile.”

*For more information about Dientes Community Dental Care and to donate to the organization, visit [dientes.org](https://dientes.org).*