



Past Santa Cruz Mayor and City Council member Cynthia Mathews was given the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Oral Health Summit 2021 last week. — Tarmo Hannula/The Pajaronian file

Local News

Group touts oral health success, working for more

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SANTA CRUZ COUNTY – Between 2014 and 2018, the number of 0-2-year-olds on Medi-Cal who visited the dentist in Santa Cruz County went up 238 percent, thanks to the advocacy of a local group focused on dental health.

In addition, visits for 3-9-year-olds went up 31 percent in that same time period.

Those numbers come from Oral Access Santa Cruz County (OAS), which on Friday released its [2021 Oral Health Report Card](#).

The good news was also tempered with bad. According to the report card, out of 80,000 people on Medi-Cal in Santa Cruz County, only 25,000 went to the dentist last year because few providers accept that insurance due to low rates of reimbursement, said Dientes Chief Dental Officer Dr. Sepideh Taghvaedi.

In addition, just over 30 percent of children have ever been to the dentist.

The group tries to boost oral health access with several initiatives, one of which is the [First Tooth First Birthday](#) program, which tries to encourage dental visits by those milestones.

OAS also focuses on encouraging young people to visit the dentist during their kindergarten year, as well as expanding prevention, treatment and clinical capacity.

The group made the report public during the Oral Health Summit 2021, this year held virtually with more than 60 people in attendance.

During the event, four local Oral Health Heroes were recognized for their work in improving oral health for the low-income communities Santa Cruz County.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Zach Friend presented the Oral Health Hero Awards to four local Santa Cruz advocates of oral health.

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Lifetime Achievement Award

Cynthia Matthews: Past Santa Cruz Mayor and City Council member, and current member of the Oral Health Access Steering Committee. Matthews spearheaded water fluoridation efforts and advocacy, led the charge for increased investments to community programs including more access to dental services. She also supported a new dental clinic project in the City of Santa Cruz.

Oral Health Hero Team Award

David Brody, Executive Director, and Alicia Fernandez, First 5 Santa Cruz County Health Outreach and Enrollment Supervisor: For their work promoting and disseminating oral health education to families of young children.

Oral Health Hero Award for Outstanding Dental Professional

Noel Kelsch, Cabrillo College Dental Hygiene Program Director: For her promotion of oral health care both locally and globally, for her advocacy of oral health care for vulnerable populations, and for her commitment to the education and training of future dental professionals.

To see the 2021 Oral Health Report Card and listen to a recording of the Oral Health Summit Visit oralhealthsc.org.