



Press Release

For Immediate Release: October 17, 2022

Contact: Sheree Storm, sstorm@dientes.org, 831-600-8256

Findings Released for 2022 Oral Health Needs Assessment for Santa Cruz County -- High notes for children, but adults and seniors still struggle

(Santa Cruz, CA) In the 2022 State of Oral Health in Santa Cruz County, Dientes reveals the continued massive gap in dental care for low-income residents where 82,000 people had Medi-Cal, but only 38% could go to the dentist. The findings are part of a 2022 study conducted by dental healthcare research firm Barbara Aved Associates, "The Continuing Need for Oral Health Services". There were some gains over the first study in 2016 – 8,000 more people have Medi-Cal and 6,000 more people were able to go to the dentist; still, 51,000 people were not able to make an annual dental visit.

Significant findings in the report include the highest proportion, 68%, of people on Medi-Cal who go to the dentist are between the ages 6 to 9. This rate dramatically drops off in the tween and teen years to a low of 21% by age 21. The rate of going to the dentist stays low throughout adulthood, increasing slightly after age 30, a trend that is mirrored by the state of California.

Santa Cruz County is doing dramatically better than the State for children ages 0-2 -- 57% of Santa Cruz County babies and toddlers with Medi-Cal insurance have an annual dental visit versus 25% for the State. As compared to the 2016 study, Santa Cruz County has seen a 60% jump in utilization for this age group. Other improvements for young children are a reduction in decay amongst kindergarteners to 18% from a high of 24% in 2016. These gains are due to a focused awareness campaign about going to the dentist by a child's first tooth or first birthday conducted by Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County and its members.

The study revealed that the largest increase in access to care was for adults, with 5,000 more adults with Medi-Cal making annual dental visits. Yet, the proportion of adults who go to the dentist is still very low -- 75% of adults with Medi-Cal were not able to receive care.

Seniors struggle as well. They have high rates of gum disease and missing teeth but receive no dental benefits through Medicare. This, despite 64% of seniors having gum disease as compared to 38% of younger adults.

Considering an equity perspective, Hispanics have the highest utilization of dental benefits for low-income residents with Medi-Cal at 48%, followed by Asians 33%, Other 30%, Native Hawaiians / Pacific Islanders 23%, Blacks, 22%, and Alaskan Natives / American Indians 21%.

Dientes EVP of Operations and co-Chair of Oral Health County Dr. Sepi Taghvaei reacts to the findings, "This study is critical to align resources behind the greatest needs in our community. We have made a concerted effort on oral health education, promoting the application of fluoride varnish in well-child medical visits, and making sure kindergarteners have a dental home for our youngest patients and are proud of the results. We have also expanded access to care for patients of all ages. Building on that success, we are looking at how to move the needle for other important groups."

For more information and to view a summary and the full study, please go to:
oralhealthsc.org/findings

#

*Photos: Oral Health Needs Assessment chart 101722.jpg
Oral Health Needs Assessment 101722.jpg
1T1B Hunter 11 months.jpg*

Dientes Community Dental Care's mission is to create lasting oral health for the underserved children and adults in Santa Cruz County and neighboring communities. 96% of Dientes' patients live at or below the poverty level. Dientes accepts Medi-Cal and offers sliding scale fees for uninsured patients.