



Neighborhood Health Center (NHC) is a Federally Qualified Health Center that serves high-risk, low-income, underserved patients by providing medical, dental, and behavioral health care services. NHC is committed to maintaining a patient-centered approach to health care by ensuring that services remain accessible, affordable, and culturally appropriate while honoring the unique needs and circumstances of each individual patient. Through this commitment NHC has established a level of trust with vulnerable communities and it is vital that NHC retains that trust by continuing to provide and expand access to high-quality healthcare. Over 21,000 patients are served annually at NHC clinics in Washington and Clackamas counties in Oregon.

NHC supports bill HB2969 which directs the Department of Education to develop oral health curriculum standards and incorporate them within health curriculum standards when they are next updated. This bill also advocates for Oregon's CCOs and Public Health agencies to continue to support coordination of school-based oral health programs to ensure that students can continue to receive oral health education and care.

The work that this bill supports is in complete accordance with NHC's mission and values, as NHC works hard to help families have access to quality, affordable dental services. Improving children's access to dental services and oral health education is vital to decreasing the risk of serious health issues down the road and to paving a path of economic security and success. Childhood dental disease is largely preventable, and no child should have to suffer from needless dental pain.

NHC's Community Dental Program provides evidence-based preventive oral health services from a population-wide approach in schools and programs serving low-income, socially and medically vulnerable populations to prevent oral health problems, identify oral health problems early, provide oral health education, and connect individuals to a dental home, especially those identified with oral health problems. These services, including dental screenings and sealants, fluoride, referral support, and insurance assistance are provided free of charge and offered to all participants/students regardless of their insurance coverage status.

Oral health education is a cornerstone of our Community Dental program and is vital to inspire cultural change around oral hygiene self-care, to engage families in understanding the importance of oral health and to promote NHC's free preventive oral health care services. The following are examples we have witnessed of the significant impact oral health education has had on youth and families served by NHC's Community Dental Program.

Residential DHS Youth- NHC provides monthly preventive services to DHS foster youth housed in a residential program for difficult-to-place youth. Most of these youth have experienced significant trauma and may be distrustful toward health services and providers. Prior to providing on-site preventive dental services to these youth, NHC staff provide education through trauma-informed, interactive, rapport building activities that focus on oral hygiene practices. Initially youth were hesitant



to receive dental services but the number of youths engaging in services has steadily increased with each event NHC staff consistently provides educational activities and engage youth in conversations around oral hygiene. Youth report changing their own hygiene habits, such as brushing and flossing more often, and the interactive activities have even opened conversations about the youths' self-esteem related to the appearance of their teeth. Youth are helping engage their peers by sharing their experiences with each other and encouraging each other to participate in dental events.

Oral Health Learning Labs- NHC's hands-on, interactive classroom education labs are a favorite activity by teachers and students alike in schools where NHC provides school-based sealant program activities. During a Learning Lab in a Clackamas County middle school a few years ago, NHC's program staff were having a group discussion with students regarding their oral hygiene. After this group discussion, a 12-year-old student approached NHC staff and informed them he had been experiencing tooth pain for some time but had not told his parents about it. NHC's hygienist screened this student a few days later (per parental consent) and found that he needed extensive treatment. NHC staff reached out to the family to connect the student to care and found that the family was having difficulty accessing dental care due to insurance issues. It was then discovered that the family was facing additional hardships, such as food/clothing insecurity and financial issues, and they needed utility assistance and housing support as they were facing near homelessness. The family shared that dental care had unintentionally become low on their list of priorities. NHC staff immediately connected the family to a local community program that was able to provide utility payment assistance and housing support. NHC staff worked with the family to resolve insurance issues and ensure full coverage through the Oregon Health Plan. While working through insurance issues NHC staff scheduled the student to be seen on a Medical Teams International (MTI) dental van within 48 hours of the initial screening. The dental van was stationed at a local community resource center and, after the dental treatment was completed, the student was provided with several boxes of food and clothing to take home for his family. NHC's Community Dental Program staff continued to work with the family over the next few weeks and was able to resolve all insurance issues, ensure that the family was receiving housing and financial assistance, and connect the family to their assigned dental clinic for ongoing treatment and regular dental care.

Our Learning Lab events often prompt conversations with youth about their individual oral health status and experiences and creates a safe space for students to share with staff if they have dental pain or concerns. Many students are not accustomed to adults asking them about their teeth, and the information uncovered during these conversations allows NHC to follow up with families to connect them to dental services, referral navigation, and screening for other socio-economic barriers that may be hindering families from receiving care and support they need. Ultimately this program ensures that families increase their own understanding of oral health and awareness on how to connect to a dental home for ongoing care.