

Dental Access Project

Communities Care about Oral Health

Oral health is deeply connected to overall health and wellbeing¹; it impacts and is impacted by other chronic physical health conditions, mental and emotional health, and economic and social wellbeing. But, how do we know that communities care about their oral health and are interested in improving the dental delivery system?

Oral health advocates consistently find that people in their communities care about their oral health, understand it's importance, and when asked about their healthcare needs, report it as one of the top concerns.² In particular, communities who are underserved by the current dental delivery system are often at the forefront of understanding systemic gaps, the impact of lack of access to care, and how important oral health is.

- When the CareQuest Institute funded grassroots organizations to engage community members on oral health needs, outcomes, and disparities³, evaluations of this work consistently showed that **communities understand the importance of and care about their oral health**. These organizations consistently identified lack of access to care and other structural barriers as problems facing their communities.
 - For example, one grassroots partner said, *"one of the initial learnings was the affirmation that communities who have little to no access to oral health care do see it as a priority; however, due to structural barriers and competing social determinants of health, care is too often financially, culturally, and geographically inaccessible."*²
- Grassroots organizers in California found that 80% of community members they surveyed **consider getting a dental checkup to be as important as getting a check up with a doctor**. In particular, about 75% of African Americans and 80% of Latinos felt this way. 79% of African Americans and 91% of Latinos also said that caring for their oral health is important for their overall health.⁴
- A representative sample of parents in Florida similarly showed that parents understand the importance of oral health. More than 75% of parents agreed that dental health is an important part of their child's overall health.⁵

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- Despite barriers like lack of coverage, cost, and past traumatic experiences with dental care, **community members still recognize the importance of oral health** and want access to high quality care.⁴
- It is not uncommon for community members to seek out care from dental providers outside the US, where costs are lower or from providers within the country without a US license.⁶ Some community members have even reported a willingness to pay more to be able to see a dentist who speaks their language⁶, showing that **access barriers** – particularly around culturally and linguistically grounded care – **and not lack of education or desire, are at the root of oral health disparities.**
- Grassroots organizers have also found **that institutional and structural factors limit access to clear information** on oral health being presented in a culturally and linguistically respectful way.
 - As a grassroots organization in Arizona found, community members understand oral health practices and the importance of prevention, but the *“knowledge that was lacking was where to go to receive free or affordable oral health services.”*⁶
- National surveys have reiterated what organizers have heard in their local communities: that **community members understand the importance of oral health, it’s connection to overall health, and care about their personal oral health.**
 - Almost all respondents of a nationally representative survey (95%) understand the connection between oral and overall health. About 70% think oral health is just as important as physical health; Black and low-income respondents, in particular, rated oral health as even more important than physical health.⁷
 - Similar surveys have found oral health to be the top health concern among community members and that more than 90% of people see the importance of preventive dental care.⁸ Additionally, almost all parents (94%) believe oral health is important for protecting their children's health.⁹
- Despite limited access to dental care as well as additional health and financial pressures presented by COVID-19, **community members continue to care about their oral health and see the importance of getting dental care throughout the pandemic.**

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- Almost three-quarters of parents say that oral health has become even more of a priority to them because of COVID-19 and 82% are paying closer attention to their children's oral care habits, as a result. ○ About two-thirds of all adults also say the pandemic has caused them to increase their prioritization of oral health and 72% are paying more attention to their oral health habits.⁹

When advocates center the experiences and follow the lead of underserved communities, the message is clear: **oral health is health and systems change is needed to ensure oral health equity.**

¹ <https://www.communitycatalyst.org/resources/publications/document/Why-Oral-Health-Matters.pdf>

² https://www.carequest.org/sites/default/files/DentaQuest%20Partnership%20Grassroots%20Progress%20Report%202019_final.pdf

³ <https://www.carequest.org/grantmaking/other-initiatives/grassroots-engagement-initiative>

⁴ <https://scopela.org/the-state-of-oral-healthcare-in-south-los-angeles/>

⁵ <https://flhealthinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CE-REPORT-2021.pdf>

⁶ Harder+Company Community Research. Grassroots engagement strategy: Landscape assessment synthesis report. 2016.

⁷ <https://www.carequest.org/system/files/July%208%20%20on%20Oral%20Health%20Access%2C%20Outcomes%2C%20and%20Quality%20of%20Care.pdf>

⁸ <https://dentaquest.com/pdfs/reports/reversible-decay.pdf/>

⁹ <https://www.deltadental.com/content/dam/ddpa/us/en/pressreleases/The%202020%20State%20of%20America%27s%20Oral%20Health%20Report%20VF.pdf>