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Dental access in Snohomish County

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Have you ever had a toothache? Many of us in Snohomish County have insurance to pay for immediate dental care and the routine maintenance to prevent cavities. However, about 27% of the county's adult population under age 65 do not have dental coverage.

People without dental coverage often cannot afford cleanings out of pocket, and only a very few local dentists – 3% -- will accept Medicaid reimbursement. Many of these people end up with painful cavities that lead to abscesses and eventual visits to hospital emergency departments.

Affordable dental care was ranked the number one challenge for Snohomish County families in a 2010 Low-income Needs Assessment – above medical care, housing, or employment help.

There is some encouraging news, however, at several levels – but not enough yet to bring smiles to everyone.

Starting Jan. 1, 2014 Medicaid coverage will expand to include dental care for the lowest-income adults through the Affordable Care Act. Medicaid eligibility is also expanding.

At the county level, the Snohomish County Dental Access Committee tries to find funding and oral health providers for the people who need dental care the most. In 2012 a grant from Snohomish County Human Services funded planning and improved dental access to low-income adults. The current partnership brings together Project Access Northwest, Everett Gospel Mission, Snohomish County Senior Services, coordinated by Snohomish Health District.

Individual efforts to improve dental access also deserve mention. Free dental care is available to low-income clients at Project Homeless Connect every year in cooperation with Community Health Center of Snohomish County. Free dental days are offered occasionally to patients who have no dental insurance by area dental clinics including All Family Dental Care in Everett, Cedar Family Dentistry in Marysville, SmileNow Dental in Lynnwood and volunteer providers in community centers. One such free dental health day is set for 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday, September 21 at Gold Creek Community Church in Mill Creek.

"Expanding dental access for low-income adults in Snohomish County is a work in progress, for sure," said LeeAnn Hoaglin-Cooper, dental hygienist at Snohomish Health District. Cooper also facilitates the Dental Access Committee meetings. Cooper noted that dental care for children is still provided by the state.

"Poor oral health leads to costly emergency attention, and untreated tooth troubles also lead to poor nutrition, and that opens the door to other health issues," said Cooper. "Increasing the availability of dental care will improve the community's health."



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