

Policy At A Glance:

California's Efforts to Improve Oral Health

Oral health is an essential part of overall health and wellbeing, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a state-wide dental staff shortage. This brief provides an overview of the oral health components of California's FY 2022-23 Budget, which made significant investments in dental workforce development and access to dental care.

Introduction

Oral health refers to the health of our gums, teeth, and the entire oral-facial system that gives us the ability to speak, eat, smile, and show emotions.^{1,2} It is an integral part of an individual's overall health as poor oral health can lead to tooth decay, periodontal diseases, nutritional deficiencies, and systemic conditions such as sepsis.³ Additionally, it can contribute to poor quality of life, lead to poor health outcomes, and share common risk factors with other medical conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.^{3,4}

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, dental practices in California were already facing staff shortages, alongside inaccessibility to dental care and a lack of community-based dental clinical rotation sites.⁵ As dental practices begin to recover and stabilize financially, staffing remains well below demand across the state, leading to a greater demand to recruit dental staff.⁶

On June 27, 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the 2022-23 Budget Act (SB/AB 178), which includes significant investments towards improving oral health and the oral health workforce development.^{5, 7, 8}

This brief will provide an overview of the significant and historic state budget investments in dentistry and oral health access in California.

Roles of the Dental Team

Dentist Responsible for providing oral health guidance and carrying out preventive and restorative care⁹

Dental Hygienist Responsible for performing regular cleanings and offering tips for effective home care¹⁰

Dental Assistant Responsible for a wide range of tasks, such as taking x-rays and impressions¹⁰

Dental Laboratory Technician Responsible for creating custom dentures, crowns, veneers, and orthodontic appliances¹⁰

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Addressing California's Dental Workforce Shortage

Dental practices across the state have experienced staffing shortages due to a lack of dental assistants since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with first year enrollment into dental assistant programs declining in the last 10 years by 50%.⁶ In response, California's 2022-23 state budget signed by Governor Gavin Newsom on June 27, 2022, addresses significant gaps in dental practices and makes strides in improving oral health. This budget includes a \$1.7 billion investment to address California's dental workforce shortage, staff recruitment, and training.^{5,8}

Funding from this budget will support the Health Workforce Education and Training Council, whose aim is to build a culturally competent and diverse healthcare workforce. Additionally, it will support the Multilingual Health Initiatives to expand scholarship and loan repayment for multilingual applicants.⁵

Within this budget, \$45 million will be dedicated to developing and expanding the High Road Training Partnerships, which is a public-private partnership initiative of the California Workforce Development Board. The aim is to provide training and career-ladder opportunities, including training and job placements for dental assistants.⁶ Additionally, a portion of this funding will be dedicated to expanding Smile Crew CA, a dental assistant training program designed to create a broad pool of qualified candidates.^{5,6}

Furthermore, \$175 million will be provided over a three-year period to support apprenticeship course development, classroom instruction, and other activities with a focus on nontraditional apprenticeships under the newly created Apprenticeship Innovation Program.^{5,6} The Apprenticeship Innovation Program provides grants, reimbursements, or other forms of funding to support apprentice programs or to train apprentices. The three-year investment includes an additional \$60 million for fiscal years 2023-24 and 2024-25 to fulfill Governor Newsom's goal of creating 500,000 healthcare apprenticeships, including dental assistant apprenticeships, across the state by 2029.⁵

Smile Crew CA

Smile Crew CA is a dental assistant training program and recruitment campaign sponsored by the California Dental Association (CDA) and the Delta Dental Community Care Foundation. The goal is to place dental assistants in open dental positions throughout California and to create job opportunities for dental assistants who have been displaced by the pandemic. The pilot program began in the San Francisco Bay Area in April 2021 and has since expanded to San Diego County, San Bernardino County, and the South Bay of Los Angeles County.¹¹



Improving Oral Health Access

Health Equity and Access

Patients with special needs often face a lack of access to oral health care due to a minimal number of dental offices having the infrastructure to accommodate such patients (e.g., wheelchair lifts, other specialized equipment, capacity to perform general anesthesia, etc.).^{5,12}

Through the FY 2022-23 budget, a one-time investment of \$50 million is dedicated to funding grants to build a network of new specialty dental clinics and to expand settings that serve individuals with physical, developmental, or cognitive disabilities.⁵

Medi-Cal providers will be able to apply for up to \$5 million in grant money to aid in the construction and expansion of their practices to serve this special population. In exchange, they must serve the special needs population for at least 10 years.⁵

Expansion of the Medi-Cal Crown Benefit

With more than half the children and one third of adults in California relying on the state's Medi-Cal program for their dental coverage, Governor Newsom committed significant funding towards improving the Medi-Cal Dental Program.⁶ New support through the budget includes expanding the adult crown benefit to include laboratory-processed crowns, effective July 2022.⁵ Allowing dentists to save

the tooth by placing a long-lasting customized crown can assist in avoiding costly procedures, such as root canals.^{5,6}

Expansion of Rotation Sites for Dental Students

To improve the oral health of underserved population groups in California, a one-time investment of \$10 million is allocated to create new and enhanced community-based clinical rotations for dental students. Furthermore, a newly developed consortia of California dental schools will be responsible for creating these rotations with two goals in mind: "(1) to improve access to quality healthcare service; and (2) to foster a healthcare workforce that is able to address current and emerging needs."⁵ Funding will be available through June 2027, at which time the program outcomes will be assessed by the California Department of Public Health.¹³

CalHealthCares Student Loan Repayment Program

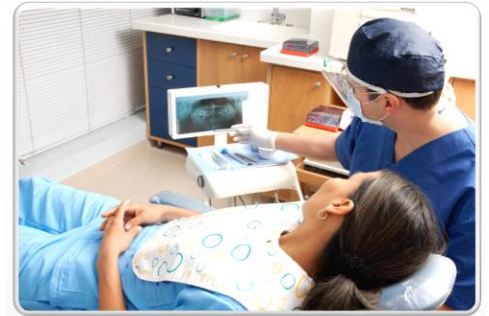
The budget provides a permanent extension and funding for the existing CalHealthCares Student Loan Repayment Program. This allows the program to continue expanding access to care by supporting new dentists serving the Medi-Cal population.^{5,6} To date, approximately 120 dentists have been awarded up to \$300,000 in loan repayment in exchange for caring for the state's most vulnerable populations.^{5,7}

Conclusion

Oral health is critical to overall health as healthy teeth, gums, and the oral-facial system allow individuals to smile, speak, and chew.¹ Oral conditions are interrelated with chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease and are affected by high-risk behaviors such as using tobacco and consuming sugary foods and beverages.¹ As the COVID-19 pandemic transitions to an endemic and dental practices begin to recover and stabilize, staffing shortages and disparities in access to oral health care persist. With its 2022-23 state budget, California's efforts to address these staffing shortages by providing gateway programs into dental careers are in motion. Additionally, it provides funding for expanded infrastructure to provide equitable dental care experiences for special needs populations. These investments to improve oral health care access for all Californians are a step toward the right direction.

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Did you know?

Each year in the US, over \$45 billion in productivity is lost and approximately 34 million school hours are lost due to unplanned (emergency) dental care.¹⁴



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