

## Colorado Faces Dental Coverage Crisis

[By Katy Human](#)

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*Dental Director for Salud Family Health Center in Commerce City, Eva Poulson, right, goes over an x-ray with 4th-year dentistry student, Sharla Aronson, at the clinic Thursday morning. (Post | Andy Cross)*

Eighteen of the 20 teeth in 4-year-old Jennifer Gomez's mouth were pitted with cavities.

Jennifer never complained to her mother, but when the girl opened wide during a screening at her Head Start program, the visiting hygienist didn't need an X-ray to see the holes.

The process of restoring Jennifer's mouth started last week in the Salud Family Health Center's Commerce City dental clinic, which charges patients on a sliding scale based on income.

"We did two teeth today. It'll probably take five more visits," said Salud dentist Eva Paulson as she pushed a crown on one of Jennifer's decayed molars.

The little girl's story is part of a broader problem - one that has been overshadowed by the health insurance crisis.

While 17 percent of Coloradans have no medical insurance - about 790,000 people - U.S. Census Bureau figures show that more than three times as many have no dental coverage.

A quarter of all third-graders in the state have untreated dental decay, figures show.

The consequences go beyond the achy jaw or gap-toothed smile, Paulson said.

Tooth and gum infections can trigger heart and lung disease and make it harder for diabetics to regulate their blood sugar, Paulson said.

Earlier this year, a 6-year-old in Mississippi and a 12-year old in Maryland died from severe infections that spread from dental cavities.

Poor oral health in pregnant women has been associated with low-birth-weight babies - another major problem in Colorado.

Still, in February, Colorado Medicaid stopped covering preventive dental care for poor, pregnant women.

"We know it's important," said Joanne Lindsey of the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing. "It's a funding issue."

Oral-health advocates in Colorado are now pushing to bring dental care into the state's health care reform debate.

The state blue-ribbon panel on health care - which will make recommendations to the state legislature - did look at the dental care issue and dental benefits for adults, and children are included in the proposed public health plans for the poor and children.

The commission, however, has made no recommendations whether private insurance plans should include a dental benefit.

For now, government insurance programs for the poor and elderly do not cover dental care for adults.

### **Others pick up tab**

Few dentists will accept Medicaid patients because state reimbursement rates are too low, said Deborah Colburn, managing director of Oral Health Awareness Colorado!

In some parts of the state, it's an hour's drive to the nearest dentist - or several hours to one who will accept Medicaid.

This year the Colorado Dental Association started a "Mission of Mercy" program.

Nearly 100 private dentists spent a weekend last month treating 1,300 people for free in a building at the Alamosa fairgrounds.

People drove in from across southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, and started forming a line at 11 the night before, said Molly Pereira, associate executive director of the Colorado Dental Association.

"At 4:30 a.m., there were 400 people wrapped up in sleeping bags in line, with kids. It was amazing," Pereira said.

The mission raised the ire of local dentists who have been working to provide consistent treatment for San Luis Valley residents at federally qualified health clinics in the valley.

"You can't get your dental needs taken care of in just one day," said Marguerite Salazar, president and chief executive of Valley-Wide Health Systems Inc., which runs four nonprofit health clinics in the San Luis Valley - including one in Alamosa.

Valley-Wide's clinics treated 9,700 patients last year through the dental program, a 16-fold increase in the last decade, Salazar said.

In Aurora, the University of Colorado Denver School of Dental Medicine is picking up some patients who can't afford private care.

Last week, Denver resident Jerry Dukes reclined in a chair there, getting the last of five implants from fourth-year dental student Roxanna Nicoll.

Each new tooth cost him about \$1,600 - less than half what it would cost in a private dental practice.

Dukes, 64, has neither medical nor dental insurance.

When three dental bridges broke in the back of his mouth - "Bam, bam, bam, one after the other," he said - there weren't many options.

"I put it off, put it off, put it off," Dukes said. "You know, you can chew up a nut with your front teeth if you need to. I switched to hamburger from steak."

Dukes was sitting in one of 40 dental chairs in a vast open room, where students, guided by seven attending faculty members, worked with some of the latest equipment .

"This really is a great deal," said Daniel Wilson, associate professor of restorative dentistry and one of the supervisors.

### **Getting out of Medicaid**

"There's a huge gap in dental coverage," Wilson said. "And look, it's not just pain. A prosthesis means a job sometimes. It can make you employable, if you can't smile because you're missing teeth."

In addition to the clinics in Aurora, the UC Denver dental school launched a mobile pediatric clinic last summer, said Diane Brunson, director of oral health for the state health department.

The mobile clinic treated kids in Eagle and Grand counties at low cost, Brunson said. Those trips are scheduled to continue in the spring.

Last October's Mission of Mercy is also slated to be repeated annually, in places around the state with high medical needs, according to the Colorado Dental Association.

Still, it is an uphill battle. More than 1,000 dentists in Colorado are registered to treat children through Medicaid, according to state figures. But Gary Cummins, executive director of The Colorado Dental Association put that figure closer to 500.

"There may be less now," Cummins said.

"Most of the people we know here, they've gotten out of Medicaid, mostly because of the low reimbursement," said Kathy Hurd, who works as the business manager for her husband's general family dentistry practice in Pueblo.

Mark Hurd treated children under Medicaid from 1988 to 2006, when he gave up the program after a series of billing mishaps that left him short \$6,000, the Hurd said.

### **A tiny success**

In Commerce City, Paulson said she tries not to think about what it would take to meet the demand for services - a doubling of staff? A tripling?

"I don't go there," Paulson said. "It's too frustrating, and it isn't going to happen."

Finishing a filling for Jennifer Gomez, she tells the 4-year-old, "Open up big, love."

When they were finished for the day, Paulson followed as the little girl bounced off the chair and ran down the hallway to her mother, Marisella Rodriguez, and a chest full of small toys.

*Katy Human: 303-954-1910 or [khuman@denverpost.com](mailto:khuman@denverpost.com)*