

## EASTERN PLAINS ORAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

Prevention of oral disease in children in three Eastern Colorado frontier counties has become a reality, thanks to a special partnership of health care and educational organizations. The Eastern Plains Oral Health Initiative targets at risk rural children without a dental home through a school-based oral health education and prevention program.

“We’ve had a positive impact on the oral wellness of the children in three frontier counties,” said Sally Henry, executive director of the Centennial Area Health Education Center (CAHEC) in Greeley. “Not only have we been able to increase the availability of oral health services and education to underserved, at-risk children, but we have removed some of the financial and logistical burdens for parents and guardians.”

Launched in 2007, the initiative focused on Cheyenne, Kit Carson and Lincoln counties, all with either limited or no professional dental providers. Cheyenne, the most sparsely populated of the three, has no resident dentist or dental hygienist. Kit Carson has two hygienists but no dentist who will accept Medicaid clients, and in Lincoln, only Plains Medical Center offers dental services for Medicaid-eligible children.

To get the program going, CAHEC put together a planning team that included representatives from county health departments and local dental hygienists. School superintendents and the Plains Medical Center in Limon become key supporters as well. Initial funding of \$90,000 was provided by Caring for Colorado Foundation.

CAHEC served as the grant administrator and fiscal agent for the project. The health departments coordinated the program with the local schools, parents and dental providers, and assisted with the educational component. The local dental hygienists provided the oral health services, including screenings and applying fluoride varnish and sealants. The schools were vital in making class time available to see the students.

The goals of the project were ambitious, but clear:

- Screen pre-school and K-2 students for dental disease,
- Provide fluoride varnishes for students,
- Provide dental sealants to second graders,
- Conduct oral health education sessions for both students and parents/guardians.

Getting parental permission to see the students was a challenge. Letters were sent home explaining the program. Back to School Nights and other large parent gatherings proved best for signing up the children and educating the parents. Posters and notices in the local newspapers also helped. The initial efforts paid off, however.

Of the 704 K-2 students enrolled in the combined three counties, 257 received dental screenings and fluoride varnish. Sealants were applied to 59 of 167 second graders. And 454 students were in attendance for an oral health education session.

As importantly, initial concerns from the schools were overcome. At the conclusion of the first year of the project, one superintendent commented, “Thank you so much for caring and taking care of our children.” A teacher said, “Initially I was afraid about interruptions, but now I’m okay with it.”

The school-based format is very effective, Henry said. The Initiative hopes to reach more parents in the future and plans to work with the schools to create group parent education session opportunities. To reinforce staffing needs, next year public health nurses will be trained to screen and apply fluoride varnishes. To help keep the program going, the Initiative has applied to Caring for Colorado Foundation for a continuation grant.

“The Eastern Plains Oral Health Initiative has become a state model for providing school-based oral health prevention services and education in rural and frontier areas,” said Henry.

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