

Team Name: Project Smile

Major Activities: Cabarrus Health Alliance (CHA) and Guilford County Health Department (GCHD) set out to explore a shared services model for their dental programs, naming this effort Project Smile.

The project team hired a consultant to perform an assessment of each county's dental program including activities, human resources, other available resources, capacity, capabilities, and technology. Based on the results, the consultant developed three practice improvement plans – one for each county and one for Project Smile. The recommendations that emerged addressed the sharing of staff, CHA's dental mobile unit, and bulk purchasing.

A major driver for GCHD's participation in Project Smile was its historical difficulty in retaining a qualified dentist. Early on in the project period, however, GCHD successfully hired a dentist and therefore no longer needed to explore shared staffing. At that point, the team decided to focus their efforts on other recommendations contained in the practice improvement plans.

Major Accomplishments: Project Smile generated several policy and process improvements that were implemented in both counties. CHA and GCHD reached an agreement to share the dental mobile unit owned by Cabarrus, thus expanding GCHD's reach throughout the county. In addition, the Project Smile team established a standardized referral process for dental services. After pilot testing internally (in each county's WIC clinic), the process also was used with each jurisdiction's hospitals, community health centers and private practices. Both agencies were able to track the number and source of referrals, and experienced significant success in increasing referrals to their respective dental health programs.

CHA and GCHD also began to use new billing software for their dental health programs, with GCHD sharing its training modules with CHA.

Although CHA and GCHD ultimately did not share a dentist, CHA decided it would be beneficial to develop a shared services model for dental health programs that could be used with other counties. North Carolina is largely rural, and many counties experience difficulties with recruitment and retention of dentists. As a health authority, CHA operates differently from county health departments, with one example being its ability to pay dentists more. Therefore, although CHA is smaller than other health departments in that part of the state (including GCHD), it tends to do a better job with recruitment and retention of dentists than the larger health departments in the same area. By the end of the project period, CHA was equipped to work with other communities in developing flexible and affordable dental services. These include but are not limited to a turnkey dental operation, consultation services and financial billing assistance, training and technical assistance.

Both CHA and GCHD project participants noted that the Project Smile activities served to strengthen the relationship between the two counties, with the potential for additional sharing in their future.

Challenges: Project Smile team members planned to communicate with staff about sharing dental program staff once the exploration was complete and the decision to forge ahead had been made. Staff learned about the potential sharing arrangement during a site visit with the CSPHS, which elicited some

trepidation and unease. Moving forward, then, the Project Smile team quickly developed and implemented a communications plan to ensure that staff were kept apprised of progress and also had a venue for posing questions and expressing concerns. This approach greatly helped to assuage staff anxiety.

In addition, during the last quarter of the project period GCHD was restructured to become part of a county Department of Health and Human Services. This changed the key players of the local governing bodies, which then led members of the Project Smile team to devote some of their effort to fostering new relationships. Although this did not derail any of the work that was underway, the relationship-building ended up requiring more time from the existing team members.