

# U.S. Program Oral Health Project



## → Integrating Low-Literacy Dental Health Education into the Health Care Safety Net



### PROJECT SUMMARY

AMERICARES IS LAUNCHING AN ORAL HEALTH PROJECT TO INCREASE PARTNER CLINICS' CAPACITY TO DELIVER CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE ORAL HEALTH EDUCATION AND CARE. THIS INITIATIVE WILL MAKE LOW-LITERACY EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS AVAILABLE TO SAFETY NET HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS AND THEIR PATIENTS.

### NEED FOR LOW-INCOME ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE

One in four adults in the United States have untreated tooth decay, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with 38 percent of adults ages 18 to 64 reporting no dental visits in 2014. This lack of dental care adversely affects patients' overall health and well-being. Additionally, it disproportionately affects low-income individuals dependent on hourly salaries, who lose wages when they are forced to miss work due to poor dental health. In fact, an estimated 164 million work hours are lost annually due to oral disease. Children living in poverty also suffer twice as much tooth decay as their more affluent peers, and their disease is more likely to go untreated, according to the American Dental Association. Further, a growing body of research has found associations between untreated oral disease and an exacerbation of chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke. At-risk individuals with disabilities or mental illness and the elderly often have physical, cognitive or behavioral limitations that impair their ability to perform recommended oral self-care, exacerbating both their general health and chronic conditions.

### STRATEGY FOR INCREASING PATIENT KNOWLEDGE

Americares Oral Health Project will train primary care clinic staff to promote oral health during patient visits. Oral health is one component of the complex continuum of care that is necessary to improve the overall health of low-income adults. By encouraging patients to care for their teeth and the teeth of their family members, as well as raising awareness about oral health's overall effect on health, the program is designed to have residual impact beyond its direct beneficiaries. Americares clinic partners will receive online training and patient books to integrate dental health education and disease prevention into the primary care setting. Our goal is to increase their ability to address this growing concern in safety net clinics that serve as the first line of defense for this country's most vulnerable patients.

### AMERICARES ORAL HEALTH PROJECT

Americares is partnering with the Institute for Healthcare Advancement, an expert in low-literacy education resource development, to develop a series of train-the-trainer webinars. These customized, online sessions will train staff at 30 of our safety net partner clinics to integrate low-literacy oral health education materials into primary and dental care visits. Americares will provide these same clinics with copies of "What to Do for Healthy Teeth," a dental health education and disease prevention book developed for adults at a 3rd-to-5th-grade reading level, and take-home dental products to distribute to their patients. To broaden the reach of this program, the webinars will be recorded and posted to Safety Net Center, an open source website Americares created to share capacity-building resources with clinics and health centers.



### ORAL HEALTH PROJECT GOALS

- Increase the capacity of 30 safety net clinics to address oral health and educate patients about preventive dental care.
- Teach clinic staff how to train their colleagues to use accessible educational materials to encourage vulnerable populations to improve their family's oral health.
- Distribute "What to Do for Healthy Teeth," a book written by Sadie S. Mestman, D.M.D., and Ariella D. Herman, Ph.D., and dental health care products to 6,000 patients.

### BENEFITS TO SAFETY NET CLINIC PARTICIPATION

- Free "Healthy Teeth" books for patients, available in both English and Spanish.
- Toothbrushes and toothpaste to improve patients' dental hygiene.
- Formal training on integrating low-literacy, oral health materials into patient care.
- Improved clinic services around oral health care.
- Opportunity to highlight work—addressing oral health and low literacy—to funders.

### ORAL HEALTH PROJECT TIMELINE

**Late September 2016:** Application will be emailed to AmeriCare clinic network.

**October 2016:** 30 clinics will be notified of their selection for participation in the new project.

**November to December 2016:** Thirty clinic "master trainers" will be trained in two groups using three, one-hour interactive webinars. Baseline and post-training surveys will be collected from each clinic to assess the program's effectiveness at increasing clinic staff's ability to educate patients about oral health.

**December 2016 to May 2017:** Thirty clinic "master trainers" will train their colleagues to use the "Healthy Teeth" books and provide the books and dental hygiene products to patients.

**June 2017:** Final survey to assess the effectiveness of the webinars and "Healthy Teeth" book on improving clinic services and processes around dental health.

To learn more about this project, please contact the AmeriCare U.S. Program Team at 203-658-9690 or [uspartnerships@americares.org](mailto:uspartnerships@americares.org)

"What to Do for Healthy Teeth" is an easy-to-follow guide that covers a wide range of oral health topics. It aims to help low-literacy adults care for their teeth and the teeth of their children. The book has proven effective in numerous public health settings and is supported by evidence, including a study of 60,000 families that was led by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles and partially funded by the CDC.

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