

## Innovations in Rural Oral Health Case Recommendations

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**Case Overview:** Veterans in the United States face disparate access to oral health care – only 15% are currently eligible for dental care through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Accordingly, nearly 8 million veterans have self-reported suboptimal oral health.

Innovative solutions are needed to overcome the barriers to access and ensure equitable oral health care and outcomes for this significantly underserved population. However, individuals and organizations working to design, implement, and test such innovations have variable access to information and tools that can best support their efforts. They also lack a community in which to share their experiences and findings in support of best practice dissemination.

**Ask of the Group:** Help us design the Veteran Oral Health Action Collaborative to best meet your needs:

1. To what extent has your organization explored the oral health of veterans in your communities? What needs or other findings arose from that exploration?
2. What work has your organization done in the veteran oral health space?
3. What information, technical assistance, or other guidance would your organization need to begin or expand its work in that space?

### Current Plan of Action:

- CareQuest Institute for Oral Health and AIDPH will host an eight-month intensive program focused on Veteran Oral Health: the Veteran Oral Health Action Collaborative (VOHAC).
- Monthly sessions will feature inter-professional presenters building on concepts of care integration and value-based designs to advance solutions for veteran oral health issues.
- VOHAC is designed for both clinical professionals and community representatives and advocates who want to find solutions that support optimal veteran oral health.



# Summary of Case Discussion

The exploration of oral health among veterans in various communities has been limited in many organizations. Kansas, New Mexico, Iowa, and Minnesota have not specifically looked into the oral health needs of veterans as their focus has been primarily on other populations such as children and pregnant women.

However, the Maine Bureau of Vet Services has been actively engaged in the veteran oral health space for three years, collaborating with dental practices and utilizing grant funding to serve veterans not 100% service connected. They also collaborate with dental practices at FQHCs and nonprofits, offering mini grants and sliding scale options for additional services. Other organizations have not yet started any initiatives in this area.

To begin or expand their work in the veteran oral health space, organizations require more research to understand the specific needs of veterans in their communities. This includes addressing unique needs such as treating veterans with PTSD and providing culturally sensitive care. Technical assistance and guidance are needed to educate patients, identify available services, offer transportation options, and consider alternative care models like mobile units and teledentistry. Funding is also a crucial requirement for organizations to implement and sustain initiatives.

During the exploration, it was found that there is a shortage of providers for veterans' oral health needs. Lack of awareness among other medical providers about the importance of oral health was highlighted, and building awareness among different disciplines was identified as a priority. In terms of the work done by organizations in the veteran oral health space, the focus has been on academic initiatives, including grants for dental care for the elderly and promoting mandatory rotations for dental students. Medical-dental integration and an interdisciplinary model were suggested to address the comprehensive needs of veterans.

To expand their work, organizations require resources on how to gain buy-in from leadership and develop integrated care models involving physical and mental health providers. Trauma-informed care was also emphasized as an essential component of the curriculum.

Overall, there is a need for further exploration, research, funding, and collaboration to address the oral health needs of veterans effectively and provide comprehensive care solutions.



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