



A Summary of the Iowa Virtual Community Forums

CO-CREATING ACTIONABLE NEXT STEPS

BACKGROUND

AIDPH hosted a series of virtual learning and listening sessions geared toward key target audiences to focus on the most relevant data, resources, and recommendations highlighted in [“The State of Veteran Oral Health in Iowa: Understanding Outcomes and Opportunities for Improving Oral Health and Well-Being for Iowa Veterans.”](#) Designed as interactive events, these forums were tailored to the specific needs of Iowa oral health stakeholders, inviting them to co-create actionable next steps. These forums were supported by the [Delta Dental of Iowa Foundation](#).

COMMUNITY FORUM 1: IMPROVING THE ORAL HEALTH OF IOWA VETERANS THROUGH POLICY

This Iowa Community Forum began with a focus on the state of veteran oral health in Iowa, discussing policy solutions, advocacy opportunities, and engaging stakeholders for collective action based on information in “The State of Veteran Oral Health in Iowa: Understanding Outcomes and Opportunities for Improving Oral Health and Well-Being for Iowa Veterans.”. AIDPH provided an overview of the report’s structure and findings, highlighting priority areas, historical context, and objectives. The presentation then delved into impacts of oral health access and infrastructure, disparities among Iowa veterans, and potential policy solutions.

The following discussion outlined several strategic actions to improve veteran oral health care including:

- Exploring teledentistry and mobile dentistry to enhance care access for rural veterans.
- Emphasizing the importance of education, trauma-informed care, and individual-level initiatives, with a call for incremental changes in daily practices.
- Advocating for dental and hygiene associations to offer trauma-informed care courses for continuing education, alongside policy changes requiring veteran-specific training for dental clinicians as part of licensure or continuing education.

Note: AIDPH is actively seeking funding to support the implementation of recommendations and promote data-informed decisions. Iowa stakeholders were encouraged to seek additional funding based on these data-driven recommendations to bolster veteran oral health initiatives.

COMMUNITY FORUM 2: IMPROVING THE ORAL HEALTH OF IOWA VETERANS THROUGH INTEGRATED CARE

This session reviewed data from [“The State of Veteran Oral Health in Iowa: Understanding Outcomes and Opportunities for Improving Oral Health and Well-Being for Iowa Veterans.”](#) showing that veterans experience higher rates of chronic disease conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, compared

to non-veterans, and discussed how integrated care is the best solution for better health outcomes for veterans and health care system cost savings. The chronic health conditions discussed exacerbate oral health issues, leading to worse outcomes for veterans, even when controlling for factors like rurality, income, and education. Data from the report highlighted the financial benefits of treating these conditions in an integrated system. For instance, for every dollar spent on dental care for veterans with diabetes, a dollar is saved on medical outcomes; for heart disease, the savings are even higher at \$2 saved for every dollar spent.

Themes heard during the forum included:

- **Surprise at Cost and Coverage Gaps:** Participants expressed surprise at dental care costs for veterans and learned that not all veterans have dental coverage through the VA, a common misconception that needs to be addressed in community education.
- **Clarification on Costs and Coverage:** Participants highlighted the fact that compiling more robust data on the number of veterans in Iowa who are on Medicaid could provide additional clarity on paths forward.
- **Actionable Recommendations:** Participants also discussed steps that could impact the oral health system in both the long and short term. Strategies discussed included continuing to explore and support the Iowa Veterans Trust Fund, ensuring veteran status is flagged on intake paperwork, and addressing the healthcare workforce shortage, particularly in rural areas, by enlisting the help of educational institutions.

COMMUNITY FORUM 3: IMPROVING THE ORAL HEALTH OF IOWA VETERANS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTION

This forum focused on the state of veteran oral health in Iowa, discussing research findings, collaborative opportunities, and community engagement. The meeting primarily centered around the development and findings of the ["The State of Veteran Oral Health in Iowa: Understanding Outcomes and Opportunities for Improving Oral Health and Well-Being for Iowa Veterans"](#) funded by [Delta Dental of Iowa Foundation](#), which aimed to understand contributing factors to poor oral health outcomes among veterans and strategic recommendations for improvement. Discussions also covered challenges in veteran oral health care infrastructure, including factors such as eligibility, disparities in care access, and social determinants of health. The meeting highlighted challenges affecting veteran oral health, emphasizing the need for collaborative action to improve outcomes. It also delved into the physical health and chronic diseases experienced by Iowa veterans, advocating for VA dental eligibility expansion and forming a Veteran Oral Health Advocates Coalition. Additionally, there were discussions on community-driven educational campaigns for oral health literacy and non-traditional stakeholder collaboration. The meeting concluded with plans for virtual community forums and an in-person statewide summit.

Discussions during this forum emphasized several key actions to improve oral health care for veterans in Iowa, including:

- Engaging stakeholders to identify the target audiences for the report and gathering feedback through a poll to tailor strategic recommendations for usability.
- Highlighting concerns such as lack of eligibility or dental care coverage, housing insecurity, trauma-informed care, workforce issues, oral health literacy, transportation barriers, and affordability issues impacting veteran oral health in Iowa.
- Considering the formation of a coalition of veteran oral health advocates in local communities.



COMMUNITY FORUM 4: COMMUNITY VOICES ON VETERAN ORAL HEALTH IN IOWA — PERSPECTIVES AND PLANNING FOR PROGRESS

This forum brought together stakeholders to share first-hand experiences on the challenges and successes related to improving oral healthcare for Iowa veterans. This session focused on practical insights from community leaders, public health professionals, and dental practitioners, highlighting both systemic barriers and innovative solutions in serving veterans. The forum also paved the way for shaping the agenda for the ensuing statewide in-person summit on veteran oral health in Des Moines on August 13, 2024. Several key points were discussed, including the challenges in reaching rural veteran populations, the importance of integrating dental and medical care, and the critical role of care coordinators like those in the I-Smile Silver program. These care coordinators, described as dental “social workers,” assist veterans in navigating complex systems of care. The forum emphasized the need for continued collaboration among community members, veteran service officers (VSOs), and healthcare providers to reduce disparities in veteran oral health.

Themes heard during this forum included:

- **Barriers to Accessing Dental Care:** Veterans in rural Iowa face numerous obstacles in securing dental care, including the lack of nearby dental providers, transportation issues, and the challenge of obtaining multiple treatment estimates. For example, an I-Smile Silver coordinator, noted that veterans often struggle to meet the requirement of two treatment estimates, especially in counties with few dentists. Transportation and medical complexities further exacerbate these issues, particularly for veterans with lower incomes.
- **Care Coordination and I-Smile Silver's Role:** The I-Smile Silver program plays a pivotal role in helping veterans navigate the system, with coordinators working closely with veterans to manage applications for financial assistance through the Iowa Veterans Trust Fund. These coordinators act as care navigators, helping veterans understand treatment plans, gather necessary documentation, and connect with dental offices willing to provide care. The personal stories shared during the forum reinforced the importance of this support, particularly in underserved rural areas.
- **Successful Local Initiatives:** The forum highlighted successful initiatives like Webster County's Veterans Free Dental Day, which provided over \$10,000 in dental services to veterans ranging in age from 33 to 92. These events are examples of community-driven efforts to fill gaps in care, and they demonstrate how collaboration between local dental practices and public health departments can make a significant impact on veterans' oral health.
- **Challenges in Medical-Dental Integration:** A recurring theme was the difficulty in integrating dental and medical care for veterans. The challenges of coordinating care for veterans with medical complexities can be exacerbated by the lack of shared electronic health records between dental and medical providers which often causes delays and confusion. This disconnect was identified as a major barrier to providing comprehensive care for veterans, especially those with more complex health needs.
- **Transportation Issues:** Transportation remains a critical issue for many veterans, particularly those in rural areas. Community members highlighted the difficulty of getting veterans to dental appointments, often requiring long travel distances. The lack of available transportation adds to the complexity of accessing care. This was echoed by other forum participants, who suggested exploring solutions for better access, such as partnerships with local transit services.



COALESCING COMMUNITY INPUT FOR FUTURE DIRECTION

With the goal of identifying the top three or four strategic recommendations, AIDPH engaged the community in a “funneling” process. Following the community forums and in advance of the in-person summit, AIDPH conducted a survey with Iowa community members and veteran oral health stakeholders to identify the strategic recommendations that were most important to them. The survey results revealed the following key strategic recommendations that were brought to the statewide summit for discussion.

KEY STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SURVEY

Policymakers

- Expand and strengthen the I-Smile program.
- Expand Medicaid eligibility to include veterans, particularly high-risk, high-cost veterans.
- Incentivize providers by increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates.

Healthcare Providers

- Add veteran status to intake paperwork and ask every patient if they are a veteran.
- Train yourself and your colleagues on the unique needs of veterans.
- Leverage dental and dental hygiene schools for preventative care

Advocates

- Advocate for VA dental eligibility expansion.
- Consider forming a coalition of veteran oral health advocates.
- Develop community-driven educational campaigns to support oral health literacy.

**Note: the full report included strategic recommendations for researchers, however the survey results did not include those as priority areas for Iowa stakeholders.*

