

Case Study: West Virginia Veterans Facing Oral Health Crisis



Located in Huntington, West Virginia, the Dentistry & Oral Surgery Department at The Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine at Marshall University (MU) is committed to serving Veterans since opening its doors almost 10 years ago. This commitment deepened when, four years ago, the clinic began seeing an influx of uninsured Veterans, which coincided with Highmark West Virginia Charitable Fund's decision to make oral health a funding priority. And thus, the Stars, Stripes, and Smiles Program began. This partnership enabled uninsured

and underinsured veterans, military members, and their families to access comprehensive dental services. This program has been one of the most impactful for both staff and patients. Highmark not only made the initial investment to create the program, but also had its staff attend the first Veterans' Day event, thanking Veterans for their service, passing out goodies, and lending a hand. They continue to show up every year.

"We were seeing several one-day events providing dental services across the state, but in hearing the stories of someone having to decide what was more important, a filling on a front tooth or an extraction of a painful molar. **I knew that wasn't good enough,**" said Cathy McAlister, Executive Director, Highmark WV Charitable Fund for Health.

"I love that this program covers the patients until their treatment plan is completed. These individuals served our nation, missed holidays, first steps, and sacrificed so much; **they deserve a smile to be proud of!**"

Highmark Health has been a constant supporter of the program, now in its fourth year and, due to the great success, MU has expanded the Veterans' oral health work to include: training dental professionals in providing trauma-informed care to Veterans, conducting oral health surveillance of West Virginia Veterans' oral health conditions, learning first-hand about the obstacles and barriers to dental care, and working with West Virginia's Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). This work enables the collection of meaningful data that informs policy improvements. Even with this progress, much remains to be done before all Veterans receive the oral health care they need and deserve.

Understanding Access

Veterans with a 100% service-connected disability are eligible for Veterans Administration dental services, which is a tremendous benefit. Still, the reality for many West Virginia Veterans is that, as in all rural areas, access is not easy. A large percentage of WV veterans



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seek care from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and FQHCs. Although VHA facilities are located throughout WV, only four offer dental services. Dental care services are often limited, and appointment times are infrequent. Not only are travel and transportation factors, but navigating the dental services program system can also be challenging. West Virginia lacks reliable broadband connectivity for those who have the technological know-how to get online, navigate websites, search for providers, and request appointments, which means long waits on hold while trying to find answers. Even if geographic location and internet access were not an issue, those with service-connected disabilities often have numerous comorbidities, including chronic disease and pain, and many are not able-bodied. Veterans are more likely to develop diabetes, heart disease, and chronic pain, all of which impact oral disease and can also affect a veteran's ability to care for themselves, making it more challenging to access and receive necessary dental care.

Contributing Conditions that Impact Oral Health

Diabetes	Heart Disease	Chronic pain
Veterans are more than twice as likely to have type 2 diabetes as the general population. Veterans with Diabetes were about 40% more likely to be edentulous than veterans without diabetes.	Veterans with heart disease were about 30% more likely to be edentulous than veterans without heart disease.	Chronic pain is more common in the veteran population – this pain can harm health and well-being, limiting a person's ability to work and perform daily life activities. It can also contribute to substance abuse.

Recent reports published by CareQuest Institute for Oral Health indicate there are 18 million veterans in the US, of which 9 million receive healthcare from the VHA. Yet only 1.8 million are eligible for dental care through the VHA, and just 582,000 are utilizing it. Nationally, more than 76% of VHA enrollees do not qualify for dental care coverage. For veterans who seek and find dental care, the experience can trigger memories of past trauma. Although trauma is not specific to veterans, the prevalence is higher than in the civilian population. For veterans who deployed and served in combat, the rate is higher. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is not typically documented in dental health history. PTSD will often lead to avoidance of dental visits altogether. Understanding and practicing trauma-informed care is essential when treating veterans, yet it is not part of the dental education curriculum. A patient-centered approach that utilizes principles to create a safe environment, enhance patient trust, and employ effective techniques and strategies is critical for effective veteran oral care.

“Having our Community Oral Health Team lead the state's first and only Trauma Informed Care training for Dental Professionals is just a reflection of their passion and commitment to **improving the oral health of West Virginia's Veterans**”, said

This piece was prepared by Bobbi Jo Steele-Hessen as part of AIDPH's 2025 Veterans Oral Health Week.

Raj Khanna, DMD, MD, Professor and Department Chair, Dentistry & Oral Maxillofacial Surgery, Marshall University School of Medicine. For the Marshall staff, this commitment stems from a direct connection to our nation's Veterans. "We have **several staff members who are veterans themselves**, as well as others who are married to or have family members who have served," he added.

Policy Solutions are Critical to Improving Veteran Oral Health

Policies that expand dental care coverage through the VA could help reduce the high cost of healthcare for West Virginia veterans and improve their quality of life. Dental and dental hygiene schools that incorporate trauma-informed care into their curricula to improve the patient experience, and these system-level changes would result in improved access to oral health services for veterans. "There are many opportunities to make a meaningful impact on the oral health of our nation's Veterans. It starts with you, and the slightest change can mean the world to someone who sacrificed so much," said Bobbi Steele-Hesson, RDH, MPH, Department Director, Community Oral Health Division, Dentistry & Oral Maxillofacial Surgery, Marshall University School of Medicine.



"There are many opportunities to make a meaningful impact on the oral health of our nation's Veterans. It starts with you, and the slightest change can mean the world to someone who sacrificed so much," said Bobbi Steele-Hesson, RDH, MPH, Department Director, Community Oral Health Division, Dentistry & Oral Maxillofacial Surgery, Marshall University School of Medicine.

Action Steps You Can Take for the Oral Health of Veteran Patients:

1. Volunteer your services during a [Veterans Day of Caring event](#) or create your [own give-back day event](#)
2. Learn more about [trauma-informed care](#) and implement elements in your clinical practice.
3. If you are a dental provider, sign up with the [Community Care Network](#) to provide compensated dental services to those eligible.
4. Support and advocate for policy changes that improve oral health access for all Veterans. And [find out more](#) about the challenges our nation's heroes face from reliable vetted sources.



This article is authored by Bobbi Steele-Hesson, RDH, MPH, proud wife of Scott Hesson, a retired United States Marine. Scott served for 22 years, completed multiple combat deployments, and was awarded a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.