

AB 648 (Low)
Meeting the Dental Care Needs of
California's Children Spreading the Virtual Dental Home

Background

Good dental health is critical to children's ability to grow up healthy and ready to learn so that they can succeed in school and life. Yet, tooth decay is the most common chronic disease and unmet health care need of children in California. It accounts for persistent pain, trouble eating and sleeping, missed school days, and expensive emergency room visits for preventable dental problems.

Many children and other underserved populations who suffer from poor oral health face significant obstacles in obtaining dental services. For example, a recent audit of Medi-Cal's dental program found that Medi-Cal is providing dental care to fewer than half of all children enrolled in the program. In addition to a lack of providers who see children enrolled in Medi-Cal, many low-income families have difficulty accessing care because they lack affordable transportation, lose pay when they miss work, and face other socioeconomic barriers.

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The California Dental Association and The Children's Partnership are co-sponsoring AB 648 to ensure the Virtual Dental Home (VDH)—an innovative and cost-effective system for providing dental care to California's most vulnerable children and adults in community settings—can be spread across the state.

Thanks to legislation enacted in 2014 (AB 1174, Bocanegra) the VDH—originally a pilot—has the potential to become a sustainable and scalable model for delivering dental care. The VDH model of dental care uses technology to connect allied dental team members, located at community sites with dentists in offices or clinics, to facilitate the provision of comprehensive dental care for children and adults who face barriers to accessing that care in traditional service locations. To facilitate this system, AB 1174 allows for dental hygienists and specified dental assistants to perform duties previously piloted in the VDH and requires Medi-Cal to pay for dental care provided via telehealth. However, without an upfront investment in training, equipment, technical assistance, and other support that providers need to get started, the system will not be able to develop a critical mass needed to spread statewide and truly be integrated into California's dental delivery system.

AB 648 would:

- Authorize a one-time, \$4 million General Fund appropriation to establish a Virtual Dental Home grant program, under the leadership and direction of the State Dental Director, for the purpose of expanding the VDH into the state's areas of greatest need; and
- Authorize the allocation of grant funds for activities that support VDH implementation, including training, community-based learning collaboratives, technical assistance and equipment.

About the Virtual Dental Home: a Proven, Cost-Effective Solution

Through the VDH—developed by the Pacific Center for Special Care at the University of the Pacific School of Dentistry—specially trained dental hygienists and assistants collect dental information from patients in community settings—such as schools, Head Start sites, and nursing homes. They send that information electronically via a secure Web-based system (called store-and-forward telehealth) to the supervising dentist at a clinic or dental office. The dentist uses that information to establish a diagnosis and create a dental treatment plan for the hygienist or assistant to carry out. The hygienists and assistants refer patients to dental offices for procedures that require the skills of a dentist.

Through a pilot project, nearly 3,000 patients have been seen at more than 50 sites around California with overwhelmingly positive results. A rigorous evaluation has demonstrated patient safety with no adverse outcomes. And approximately two-thirds of the patients seen were able to receive the care they needed at the community site.

For more information and to support AB 648, please contact Jenny Kattlove at The Children's Partnership: (310) 260-1220, jkattlove@childrenspartnership.org or Gayle Mathe at the California Dental Association: (916) 554-4995, gayle.mathe@cda.org