

2025

**2025**  
**IMPACT**  
REPORT

CareQuest<sup>TM</sup> 

2025



CareQuest™

# IMPACT REPORT

2025



**America's oral health system is in crisis**, and this year has brought alarming setbacks that threaten the health of communities across the US. More than 72 million people lack dental insurance, and millions more are unable to afford care, forcing them to make heartbreaking choices — skipping treatment, going into debt, or even performing care at home. Despite this growing emergency, several states have banned fluoride in drinking water, and federal leaders have slashed Medicaid funding, jeopardizing dental coverage for millions. These decisions not only ignore the urgency of the crisis but actively undermine efforts to protect and improve oral health nationwide.

CareQuest Institute has taken bold action — sounding the alarm on harmful decisions, championing sustainable solutions, and equipping dental professionals and community organizations to serve those most in need. Through our pioneering subsidiary, CareQuest Innovation Partners, we've also invested in forward-thinking companies working to transform the oral health care system.

**Our 2025 Impact Report highlights the progress we've made, proving that even in a year of setbacks, we are driving change and creating a better system for all.**

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It's clear that **access and quality in oral health are in crisis across America**. Tackling that challenge is no small feat, but the potential to make a lasting, positive impact on people's lives makes it **a mission worth pursuing**.

**Wade Rakes, MBA**

*Chief Executive Officer, CareQuest*

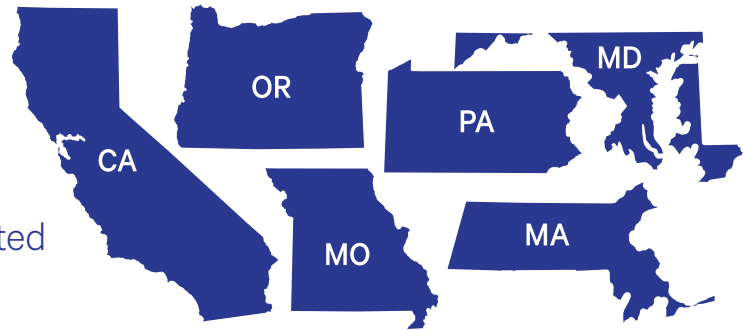
# PROTECTING DENTAL COVERAGE

In 2025, federal lawmakers delivered a major setback to oral health by slashing Medicaid spending in the budget, putting dental coverage at risk for millions of adults. **In response, we funded key initiatives, convened thousands, and developed powerful data and insights to empower advocates in communities across the country.**



The experiences from these six states offer a powerful warning: Reducing or eliminating Medicaid adult dental benefits is a short-sighted decision that harms patients, burdens health systems, and ultimately costs more in the long run.

*Report: Federal Medicaid Cuts Threaten State Dental Benefits*



Since it started in 2014, **OPEN has been** a powerful network of advocates **fighting for a better oral health system** in communities across the country.

The fourth **OPEN Hill Day** brought more than 90 members from across the US to Capitol Hill to meet with legislators about prioritizing oral health in their communities.



The network has been instrumental in my state's effort to pass a dental therapy bill.

**Lisa Pendarvis, MPH, PMP, PCMH CCE**

*Director of Programs, Oklahoma Primary Care Association*



More than **10 million adults** across **28 states** gained access to new or improved dental benefits in Medicaid through our grantmaking in the last **5 years.**



## Grantee Spotlight

With the help of CareQuest Institute funding, New Mainers Public Health Initiative (NMPHI) in Maine and Kids In Need of Dentistry (KIND) in Colorado empowered teenagers to help individuals in their communities access oral health care. KIND connects with more than 100 schools and 7,000 students in 8 districts across the state.



When state budgets are tight and cuts are needed, optional benefits are often the first to go. This year's Coverage Checker shows both how far we've come and how much we have to lose.

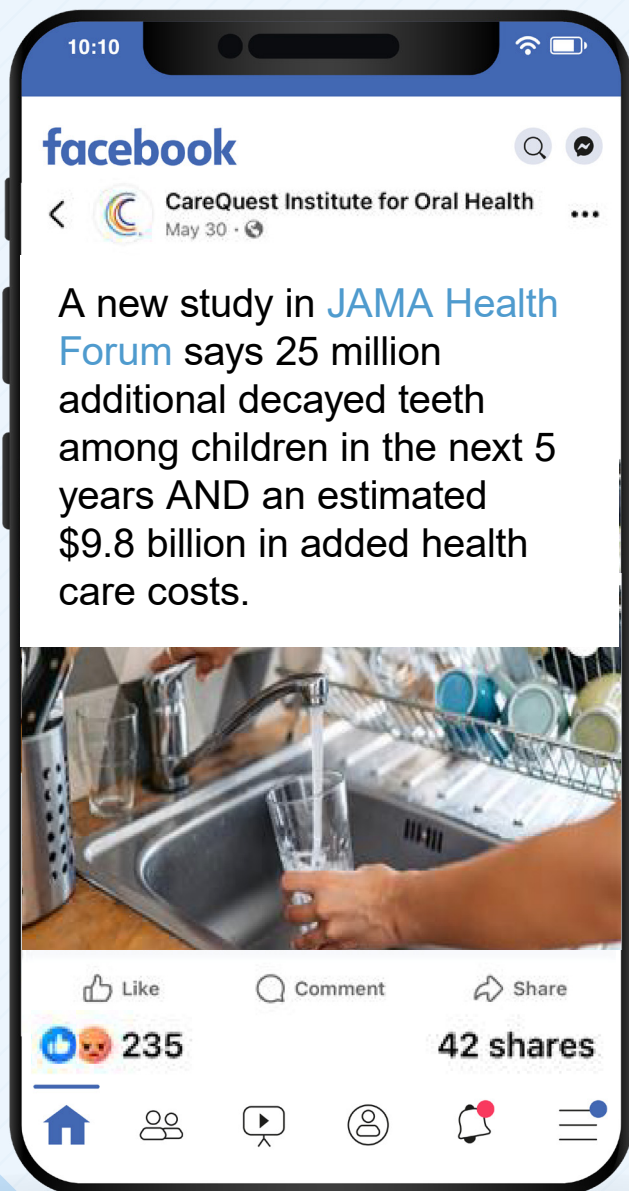
**Stacey Auger, MPH**

*Policy Consultant, CareQuest Institute*



# FIGHTING FOR FLUORIDE

Despite the support of community water fluoridation and the overwhelming research showing its benefits, some states passed legislation to restrict or remove fluoride from drinking water. **We worked with dedicated partners to stop proposed bans in several states and equipped dental professionals with the knowledge to communicate clearly with patients.**



Recent wins in Louisiana [advocates pictured above] and Connecticut demonstrate that a united stakeholder front, evidence-based data, and local engagement can protect access to fluoride regardless of the political environment.

**Matthew Steele**

*Director of State and Local Advocacy,  
CareQuest Institute*



**We educated providers, policymakers, and patients about the safety and effectiveness of community water fluoridation.**

**CareQuest**  
Institute for Oral Health

## Webinar

### Community Water Fluoridation:

How Dental  
Professionals Can  
Lead the Conversation



Thursday  
April 10, 2025



7-8 p.m. ET

ADA CERP Credits: 1



**Moderator**

Scott L. Tomar, DMD, DrPH  
University of Illinois Chicago College of Dentistry



**Presenter**

Elizabeth Carmen Lense, DDS, MSHA, FAAOMP  
American Dental Association



**Presenter**

Matt Crespin, MPH, RDH, FADHA  
Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin



A registered dental hygienist from Wisconsin was on the webinar and, thanks to knowledge gained, felt empowered to speak at a town hall meeting after the community had a non-binding referendum that was not in favor of fluoridation. She spoke, shared science, and the committee voted 4–3 to keep the water fluoridated!

**Webinar Presenter**

We led an outreach campaign, **helping dentists send close to 1,000 emails** to Kentucky legislators about the benefits of adding fluoride to drinking water.



## Grantee Spotlight

Kentucky Youth Advocates and Kentucky Voices for Health, with the help of a CareQuest Institute grant, provided evidence-based data and testimonies to advocate against a state bill that would have made water fluoridation optional in the state.

KVH's Kelly Taulbee testifies on the tens of millions of dollars in healthcare costs HB16 will add to Medicaid each year.



**NO** ON  
HB16

Eliminates Kentucky's community fluoridation mandate, giving private companies and unelected officials control over what goes in our drinking water.

# HELPING OUR HEROES

Of the more than 9 million veterans who are eligible for medical care through the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 80% are **not** eligible for dental coverage. **We provided grants, hosted events, and raised awareness that our nation's heroes need help — and policymakers can lead the way.**



Veterans pay **65% more** in out-of-pocket dental costs compared to nonveterans and visit the emergency department for non-traumatic dental conditions at a higher rate than the general population.



AMERICAN  
LEGION

PHILIPS

CareQuest  
Institute for Oral Health®

We cohosted a Capitol Hill briefing — “Veterans Deserve Dental Care: Policy Solutions to Improve Veterans’ Oral Health” — to engage policymakers and veterans about the oral health challenges veterans face.







## Grantee Spotlight

**Everyone for Veterans, Dentistry4Vets, and Mercy Foundation used CareQuest Institute funding to provide care and services for thousands of veterans in their communities.**



Sometimes having someone who is as dedicated as our hygienist and her dental assistant willing to walk people through the process is all it takes. [Veterans] feel like somebody's listening to them. They don't feel like they're just a number in a system.

**Shawn Watson**

*Grant Manager and Writer,  
Mercy Foundation*



Patricia Yellich, Executive Director and Co-founder of Dentistry4Vets, and veterans traveled to Washington, DC, to talk to legislators about veteran dental care and potential solutions that could help them access oral health care.



With this grant, we hope to inspire more participation in providing care and support to our nation's veterans, ensuring they receive the services and support they deserve.

**Jessica Elwell**

*Executive Director, Everyone for Veterans*

# ELEVATING ORAL HEALTH

Oral health often gets lost in conversations about health. It's our job to elevate it. **In 2025, we put oral health issues in the spotlight in multiple national publications and at several national conferences.**



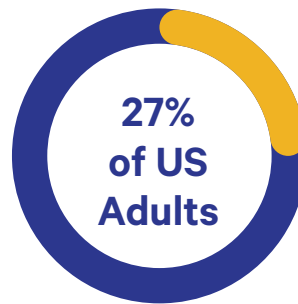
## State of Oral Health Equity in America 2025

RESEARCH REPORT

### Oral Health in America: Who Gets Left Behind?

SUGGESTED CITATION:  
Heaton, Lisa J., Channing, Hannah J., O'Malley, John, Santoro, Morgan, Preston, Rebecca, Sonneck, Adrianna, and Tinsley, Eric P. Oral Health in America: Who Gets Left Behind? Boston, MA: CareQuest Institute for Oral Health, November 2025. DOI: 10.36544/CQI2025.0101  
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Featured in **TIME**



Approximately **72 million adults** in the US **(27%)** do not have dental insurance.

Featured in **CNN**

According to a national opinion poll, **94% of respondents** think communities should not ban putting fluoride in water.



Featured in **AXIOS**

Nine states broadened their [dental] benefits by one or more services and/or increased the frequency of existing services.



Featured in **POLITICO**

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There are a lot of forces coming together to undermine oral health, particularly for people who are lower income or in areas that may not have as many resources to get the oral health care they need.



**Melissa Burroughs**

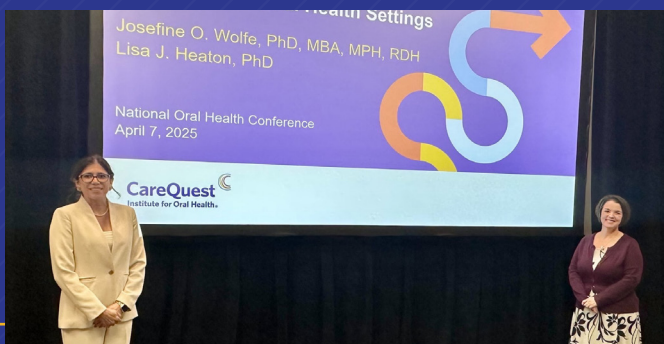
*Senior Director of Public Policy,  
CareQuest Institute*

Featured in **RollingStone**

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The absence of fluoride in drinking water can lead to higher rates of untreated cavities, which, beyond physical discomfort, can result in severe oral infections.

CareQuest Institute experts presented about oral health access, equity, and integration at dozens of national conferences in 2025.



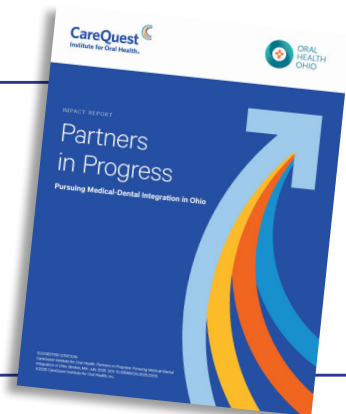
# DRIVING MEDICAL-DENTAL INTEGRATION

A better health care system treats the whole person, bringing together disciplines and care processes to produce better outcomes. **We're equipping dental and medical professionals and organizations with practical tools and resources to integrate care.**



Establishing rooted, community-based relationships between medical and dental professionals is as important as the number of patients that benefited from this project.

*Report: Partners in Progress*



## Grantee Spotlight

Dignity Health Foundation East Valley used a grant from CareQuest Institute to help fund their ICU Oral Care program. The program embedded five critical care dental hygienists into the Medical and Trauma ICUs at Dignity Health Chandler Regional Medical Center, providing care to more than 500 patients who are vulnerable to infections.







## Grantee Spotlight

The Michigan Primary Care Association, with the help of funding from CareQuest Institute, helped 22 dental programs drive improvements in care delivery and prepared three FQHCs (including eight dental sites) for upcoming payment and policy changes.



Based on recommendations from CareQuest, beginning in January, CMS will incentivize participating physicians in one of their Medicare programs to complete training through Smiles for Life and **take steps to integrate oral health in patient care with intraoral screenings and referrals.**

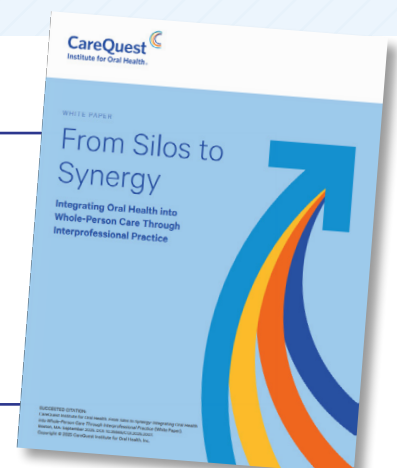


**At HLTH, approximately 1,000 people came to the Oral Health Pavilion, where clinicians conducted more than 200 A1C tests, giving patients a picture of their blood sugar level.**



We can redefine what it means to provide comprehensive, collaborative, and equitable health care for all across the lifespan.

*Report: From Silos to Synergy*



# ADVANCING ACCESS THROUGH INNOVATION

CareQuest Innovation Partners worked with mission-aligned industry partners to validate and advance promising solutions. **The team highlighted the opportunities for investors and innovators to make an impact in oral health.**



**SMILE Health** and **ACCELERATE** provided startups and industry partners with the opportunity to work together to validate and scale solutions that fulfill critical needs in oral health. SMILE Health welcomed its largest-ever cohort and introduced its new startup data hub, while ACCELERATE has reached more than 20,000 people, expanding access to care via teledentistry, scaling innovation to address common untreated conditions, and transforming health monitoring.

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I've been amazed by how willing and resourceful the industry partners are. The scale of support and engagement has been incredibly impactful for us.

**Kenny Brown, DDS**

*Co-founder & CEO, Feno, 2025 SMILE Health Cohort*



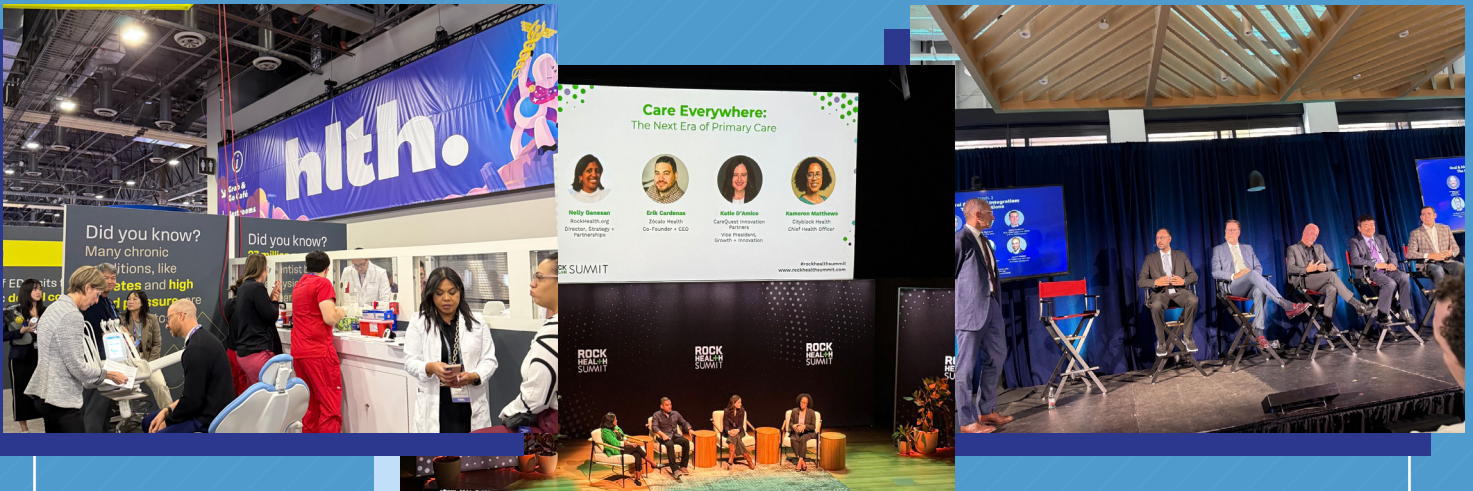
*CareQuest Innovation Partners is a for-profit subsidiary of CareQuest Institute.*



## SNAPSHOT OF THE ORAL HEALTH INNOVATION MARKET MAP



Innovation Partners published multiple reports — including a first-of-its-kind oral health market map — revealing the vast, largely untapped potential of oral health innovation and the opportunity for investors, startups, and industry leaders to drive impact.



CareQuest Innovation Partners put oral health care innovation in the spotlight at HLTH, ViVE, Dentech, and Rock Health Summit.





Join us in creating an  
oral health system that is  
**accessible, equitable, and integrated.**

Learn more about our work at  
**[carequest.com](https://carequest.com).**



