

Community Initiatives: Oral Health Coalitions

A community coalition represents a diverse group of individuals and organizations who work together to reach a common goal. Coalitions help build community partnerships, increase resources for oral health activities, promote advocacy, educate, increase visibility and recognition of oral health, and combine resources to implement joint strategies to address unmet local oral health needs and eliminate disparities.

Successful coalitions include representatives from the community and from the public and private sectors. These include: community leaders, government agencies, dental professional organizations, social service organizations, non-government organizations, community health centers and clinics, colleges and universities, faith-based organizations, businesses, insurance companies, foundations, and other public health programs.

With accurate local needs assessment information at hand, oral health coalitions can serve a variety of purposes:

- Educate others and raise awareness within the community about local and state oral health needs and help strengthen the state and local oral health programs.
- Assist in formulating plans with strategies to address their oral health needs.
- Recommend oral health program activities to local or state oral health programs.
- Identify additional financial resources within the community.

Coalition goals are as varied as coalitions themselves, but they often contain elements of one or more of the following activities:

- Influencing or developing public policy, usually around a specific issue.
- Changing people's behavior (reducing smoking or drug use, for example).
- Building a healthy community by addressing issues of the community's *physical health* (including not only medical and preventive or wellness services but also the environment, community planning, housing, hunger, substance abuse, and other factors) and its *social and psychological health* (encompassing diversity, education, culture and the arts, violence prevention, youth development, employment, economic development, mental health, and other human services).

The MCH Oral Health Program supported the creation of the Washington State Oral Health Coalition (WSOHC) in 1989 and today promotes the development of county-based (local) oral health coalitions as a source of local oral health expertise. The state coalition counts on almost 100 members, and there are also 32 smaller county-level oral health coalitions throughout Washington. These coalitions play a vital role in building local infrastructure to improve the oral health and overall health status of their communities.

The Washington State Community Roots Guide for Oral Health Coalitions is considered a national landmark in the field.

The WSOHC is a broad-based group of organizations and individuals whose mission is to promote and advocate for optimal oral health for all Washington State residents.



In support of the WSOHC mission, the coalition's guiding principles are:

- Universal access to oral health care.
- Promoting oral health services that are community-based, preventive and culturally appropriate.
- Creating partnerships with public, private, and community-based stakeholders, decision-makers, and the public regarding oral health issues.
- Clear and open communication with all stakeholders to facilitate mutual goals and objectives.
- Both the right and responsibility of individuals to participate in decisions affecting their own oral health.
- Encouraging creative approaches to oral health issues.
- Advocating for and promoting oral health intervention strategies based upon sound scientific principles.
- Recognizing the value and strength of the current dental delivery system.
- Accomplishing our mission through teamwork and continuous improvement.