

Working Together to Benefit Women in the Community: A Dental School Clinic-Community Organization Collaboration

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Abstract

Background/Significance: The mission of the CWRU School of Dental Medicine is to educate future dentists, to serve the community and profession, to provide high quality patient care in the school's on-site dental clinic, and to create new knowledge through research and scholarship. The school's dental clinic serves as a safety net clinic for the surrounding community and provides students with a wide range of clinical educational experiences.

The Ohio Department of Health has indicated that access to dental care is one of the greatest unmet health needs in the state¹, particularly among those living in poverty. Dress for Success Cleveland is a community organization that provides services for women who are living in poverty and seek to secure employment. The mission of Dress for Success Cleveland is to "empower women to achieve economic independence by providing a network of support, professional attire and the development tools to help women thrive in work and in life."² Oral health is a critical factor in the workplace, impacting speech and communication, confidence, attendance, and perceptions of professional image. Poor oral health can act as a barrier to attaining and retaining employment.

Purpose/Objectives:

The purpose of this project is to establish a collaboration between the CWRU School of Dental Medicine and Dress for Success Cleveland to improve the oral health of Dress for Success clients while enhancing the educational experience of the school's dental students.

Methods: A variety of stakeholders within the university were engaged. Meetings were held with the Dean and the Assistant Dean for Development of the School of Dental Medicine, the Chair of the Department of Community Dentistry, and the university's Executive Director for Community Relations. When agreement to move forward had been reached, an initial meeting with the executive director and program manager of Dress for Success Cleveland was arranged. The goal of the meeting was for each organization to understand the other's mission, programs and needs and to explore possibilities for collaboration.

Outcomes/Results: The two organizations determined that there is significant opportunity for collaboration. Plans for year 1 of a multi-year plan are being developed. Year 1 of the collaboration will include, for example, educational sessions on oral health offered to Dress for Success clients, a screening day to assess clients' oral health needs, and provision of information on Medicaid dental benefits eligibility/sign-up procedures. The Women in Dentistry student group was engaged to participate in the planning and implementation of Year 1 activities.

Conclusion with Statement of Impact: This project will serve as an example of creative collaboration between a dental school and a community organization to advance the missions of both organizations. The project will enhance the school's involvement in the community; increase the number of patients served in the dental clinic, thus enhancing the clinic's safety-net function and clinical educational experiences for students; and provide the opportunity for students to work with an underserved and diverse population. The project will contribute to advancing the health, well-being and employment of Dress for Success clients.

References:

1. <https://www.odh.ohio.gov/odhprograms/ohs/ohd/statedata.aspx>
2. <https://cleveland.dressforsuccess.org/>