By [Jondi Gumz](#), Santa Cruz Sentinel

Posted: 06/17/16, 7:00 PM PDT | Updated: on 06/17/2016

[1 Comment](#)

Hunter Borden, 5, is ready to get his dental care at Dientes' Give Kids a Smile Day in February. (Contributed photo -- Joop Rubens)

SANTA CRUZ >> One in four children in Santa Cruz County and one in seven in Monterey County have untreated tooth decay, according to screenings of youngsters entering kindergarten.

Of 58 private dental offices in Santa Cruz County, only 10 accept the state's dental insurance, mostly due to inadequate payment.

Nonprofit dental clinics are at capacity. [Salud Para La Gente](#) gets 10 calls a week from adults seeking dental care who cannot be accommodated. [Dientes Community Dental](#)gets twice that number.

In Santa Cruz County, 73 percent of emergency room visits in 2014 involved a preventable dental condition; in Monterey County, it was 95 percent.

Those findings in a 90-page [assessment](#) of oral health needs by Sacramento consultant Barbara Aved, released Friday.

Tooth pain is the top reason children miss school, Aved said, and dental problems have a negative impact on people trying to get jobs.

She offered 15 recommendations to be prioritized by a 15-member steering committee headed by Dr. Sepi Walthard of Dientes and county supervisor Zach Friend.

Members include Dr. Mark Ebrahimian and Dr. Nanette Benedict, Monterey Bay Dental Society, Dr. Salem Magarian, Santa Cruz Community Health Centers, Javier Carrillo, Central California Alliance for Health, David Brody, First Five Santa Cruz County and Elisa Orona, Health Improvement Partnership.

"The problem is much larger than what any one organization can address," said Sheree Storm of Dientes.

"We just can't take more patients," Laura Marcus, Dientes' executive director, said of the capacity issue.

The average Medicaid payment for an "oral evaluation" of an established patient was $44 while the California maximum was $15, then $13.50 due to budget shortfalls, a critical [state audit](#) found.

Aved surveyed 141 Monterey Bay dentists, finding 41 used to accept state dental insurance but no longer due to low payment, patient no-shows and claims headaches. Some preferred to offer free treatment.

To reconsider, dentists wanted higher payments — some said a 70 percent increase — and fewer hassles.

Marcus talked about a homeless veteran whose top priority was a solution for his mouthful of pain, one of many homeless people in Santa Cruz County.

"How do we expect them to find housing or a job?" asked Marcus. "It makes a huge impression if you can't smile."

Kathleen King of Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust asked about Salud contracting with private dentists to boost their payments.

"Only one clinic in southern California is doing it," said Marcus, noting the 38-page application is cumbersome for dentists.

County superintendent of schools Michael Watkins asked if school-based clinics could expand.

Dr. Randolph Cross of Salud said Salud has four such clinics and will open a fifth in rural Castroville.

At a small school, there may not enough patients to keep dental staff busy, Marcus said, unless siblings or parents of students can participate.

Asked if a tax on sugary beverages could fund dental services, Marcus said, "We would love that."

As for higher payments to dentists, State Assemblyman Mark Stone, D-Scotts Valley, said it's something to be discussed next year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A new assessment of oral health needs in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties makes 15 recommendations that will go to 15-member steering committee chaired by Dr. Sepi Walthard of Dientes and Santa Cruz County supervisor Zach Friend to prioritize:

•Add new clinical capacity.

•Expand use of mobile clinics.

•Consider contracting with private dentists.

•Launch "First Tooth/First Birthday" campaign.

•Target oral health promotion to pregnant women.

•Promote oral health among Medi-Cal managed care members.

•Improve access to sedation dental services.

•Encourage schools to notify parents that AB 1433 requires pre-kindergarten dental visit.

•Expand integration of dental and medical care.

•Reduce use of the hospital emergency room for preventable dental conditions.

•Support United Way Community Assessment Project.

•Advocate for higher Medi-Cal reimbursement for dental services.

•Support dental care at all federally qualified health centers.

•Fluoridate water systems.

•Share needs assessment with policy-makers and stakeholders.

Source: Increasing Access to Dental Services for Children and Adults on the Central Coast

About the Author

Award-winning reporter covering Santa Cruz business, housing, healthcare and Santa Cruz County government Reach the author at jgumz@santacruzsentinel.com or follow Jondi on Twitter: @jondigumz.