



## Press Release

**For Release:**  
June 17, 2016, 4:00 pm

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### **Dientes' Study Highlights Oral Health Access Crisis in Santa Cruz** *Oral Health Access Steering Committee Convenes to Take Action*

(Santa Cruz, CA) Dientes Community Dental Care commissioned the first-ever oral health needs assessment for Santa Cruz County to determine gaps in oral health. The resulting study, *Increasing Access to Dental Services for Children and Adults on the Central Coast*, has outlined an urgent need that requires community action. In response, Dientes has joined forces with other healthcare providers, policy makers, and community advocates to create the Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County steering committee.

The importance of visiting the dentist is often overlooked, but not receiving dental care can have serious consequences. Barbara Aved, PhD, author of the study and a leading dental healthcare consultant, comments, "Most people are not aware of how oral health is tied to the rest of your overall health. Poor oral health is linked to heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and for pregnant women, premature birth and low birth weight. These issues are especially challenging for those on Medi-Cal who can't get appointments to see the dentist."

The need is massive. Of the 80,000 Santa Cruz County residents expected to enroll in Medi-Cal this year, only 25,000 were able to visit a dentist. The needs assessment revealed that, although dental coverage is required to be made available for children under all health care plans, 30.8% of children in Santa Cruz under the age of 11 have never visited a dentist and almost one-quarter of all pre-K children in Santa Cruz County have untreated dental decay. These statistics must be addressed in order to improve the quality of life for Santa Cruz County residents.

Identifying actionable, measurable recommendations to combat one of the county's major hidden health epidemics is the Oral Health Access steering committee's main goal. In order to provide comprehensive

leadership, Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County is chaired by Dientes' Dental Director Dr. Sepi Walthard and Santa Cruz County Supervisor Zach Friend.

Supervisor Friend is enthusiastic about the work and the impact that it will have on Santa Cruz County, "Never before has a collation been pulled together to work on the oral health issues in our community. Through collaboration and education, we have the ability to create real change, especially for children."

"As a dental provider, I am faced daily with the tremendous need for dental care and education in the underserved populations of Santa Cruz County. I am so excited by the work that the Oral Health Access steering committee will be doing because safety net clinics like Dientes cannot face this serious issue alone," states Dr. Walthard. "We need community leaders to come together and for everyone to do their part in order to effectively address the problems of lack of access to oral health and education in Santa Cruz County."

Comments and ideas from the public are welcome and can be shared at: <http://oralhealthsc.org/contact/>

The recommendations from the Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County steering committee will be shared with the community in late Fall 2016 at the Oral Health Summit.

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*Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County's mission is to improve the oral health of Santa Cruz County by uniting stakeholders and advocating sound, measurable strategies that increase access to care and education. The 17-member steering committee represents a wide array of local health industry experts, community leaders, and education advocates. Facilitation of the committee is shared in partnership between Salud Para La Gente and Dientes Community Dental Care.*