

# Dental Public Health Activity Descriptive Summary

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## The Virtual Dental Home

The Virtual Dental Home (VDH) is a community-based oral health delivery system in which people receive diagnostic and preventive services in community settings. It utilizes telehealth technology to link dental hygienists and assistants in the community with dentists in dental offices and clinics forming a complete system of care. Equipped with portable imaging equipment and an internet based dental record system, the dental hygienist collects electronic dental records such as X-rays, photographs, charts of dental findings, and dental and medical histories, and uploads the information to a secure web server where the dental record is reviewed by a collaborating dentist. The dentist completes a dental examination and creates a dental treatment plan. The dental hygienist performs those preventive and early intervention services that can be conducted in the community setting and refers patients to dental offices for procedures that require the skills of a dentist. In these cases, the patient is likely to receive a successful first visit and to need fewer visits in the dental office than with a traditional referral. On-going preventive services and examination visits take place in the community.

A major component of the VDH system is patient, parent, and caregiver education. Having a dental hygienist at the community site on a regular basis provides the opportunity to educate site staff, parents, and gather caregivers about critical mouth care and dietary activities that are the key to having good oral health.

Experience with the VDH has demonstrated that two-thirds of underserved children and the majority of adults can be kept healthy in community settings by procedures that can be performed by dental hygienists as described above. In California and now several other states, because of the experience with the VDH demonstration described above, legislation has been adopted to facilitate spread of the VDH system.

### Lessons Learned:

There is a learning curve. Although the VDH system can produce better population health at lower cost per capita, it requires careful planning, a step-by-step implementation strategy and good training and technical assistance.

It is also clear that uninformed resistance or opposition to use of this system of care is decreasing as additional states recognize the potential to improve health and lower costs.

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