

Connecting Apple Health clients to dental services with the DentistLink tool

Progress report

Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187; Section 211(76); Chapter 475; Laws of 2023
June 30, 2024

Connecting Apple Health clients to dental services with the DentistLink tool

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Executive summary

Improving oral health in Washington

Washington Apple Health (Medicaid) clients have experienced great difficulty finding and accessing a dental provider. DentistLink is a referral system, connecting people to dental providers across the state of Washington. It is a collaborative effort between the Health Care Authority (HCA) and the [Arcora Foundation](#) (a state-based oral health foundation). Since 2021, [DentistLink](#) has provided Apple Health clients with greater access to dental providers and oral health care by enabling clients to:

- Search the online dental provider directory at [DentistLink.org](#).
- Call or text DentistLink Referral Specialists at 1-844-888-5465.

Clients may also receive referrals to DentistLink through a community partner or medical system via their electronic health record.

Arcora Foundation developed and manages DentistLink; working throughout the state to improve oral health for everyone, embracing health equity with no one left behind.

Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187

In 2023, the Legislature passed a biennial budget, Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187 (ESSB 5187). Section 211(76) directed HCA to continue a public-private partnership with a state-based oral health foundation to connect Apple Health clients to dental services and reduce barriers to accessing care:

\$250,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2024 and \$250,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2025 are provided solely for the authority to continue a public-private partnership with a state-based oral health foundation to connect Medicaid patients to dental services and reduce barriers to accessing care and the authority shall submit a progress report to the appropriate committees of the legislature by June 30, 2024.

On July 1, 2023, HCA executed a contract with Arcora Foundation to continue their partnership to connect Apple Health clients to dental services and reduce barriers to accessing care through DentistLink. Under this contract, HCA receives semi-annual reports from Arcora Foundation. Arcora Foundation's first report with findings from July 1, 2023, through December 31, 2023, continues to show how valuable DentistLink is for clients and providers alike.

Legislative report highlights

Arcora Foundation's report highlights improvements in both DentistLink provider participation and client utilization.

- While the number of oral health provider office locations was relatively unchanged between 2021 (665) and 2023 (669), the number of individuals accessing DentistLink increased during that same time frame.
- In 2021, DentistLink was accessed 25,380 times during the reporting period; 94.5 percent of the time those individuals indicated they were enrolled in Apple Health.
- In 2023, DentistLink was utilized 33,033 times, with 96 percent of users indicating they were enrolled in Apple Health.

Background

Prior to DentistLink, the Apple Health dental program relied on two referral tools for clients to search for and connect with dental providers:

- **InsureKidsNow (IKN):** A dentist locator designed to help Apple Health clients aged 0–20 find dental providers.
- **Find-a-Provider:** A program developed by HCA to help Apple Health clients of all ages find a provider for any medical assistance, including dental needs.

The IKN dentist locator tool arose from a requirement found in section 501(f) of the 2009 Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) Reauthorization Act (CHIPRA)¹ and was part of a package of dental-related changes that Congress introduced as a part of CHIPRA. The requirement is that every quarter, each state must submit a list of Medicaid-enrolled dentists who are currently providing services to children. Each state must also update a “summary of benefits” detailing what dental services are offered to Medicaid and CHIP enrolled children every year.

The data is made publicly accessible to families through the “Find a Dentist” page of the [Insure Kids Now website](#). Families can search by benefit plan (for example, in states where there are multiple dental managed care plans, with different networks), geographic location, and specialty.

HCA developed its own referral tool called Find-A-Provider. For several years, the agency has relied on this tool to help clients find medical and dental providers in their area. In 2020, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) released the Interoperability and Patient Access² final rule which, in part, requires provider directory information to be made available to Apple Health clients. The interoperability rules were mandated and put in place to benefit Apple Health clients and create better access to health care. To remain in compliance with the new interoperability requirements, HCA created a new Provider Directory tool. However, provider directory information regarding dental services was excluded.

With DentistLink, Apple Health clients have access to an all-in-one service to find the care they need. DentistLink is a comprehensive referral tool that can be used by all clients to find a dental provider. Arcora Foundation has owned and operated DentistLink since its inception in 2017. DentistLink focuses on connecting clients enrolled with Apple Health and those who do not have insurance or are underinsured, with a nearby dentist. The following services are provided at no cost to clients, dental care providers, or community partners:

- **Dental care provider search:** People searching for a dental provider can call, text, or search online to receive information about nearby providers that meet their needs.
 - DentistLink asks a few questions related to the client’s age, location, and dental problem.

¹ Congress. (2009, February 4). Children’s Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009. Congress.Gov. Retrieved March 25, 2024, from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-111publ3/pdf/PLAW-111publ3.pdf>.

² Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2021, December 9). Interoperability and Patient Access Final Rule (CMS-9115-F). Retrieved March 25, 2024, from <https://www.cms.gov/priorities/key-initiatives/burden-reduction/policies-and-regulations/cms-interoperability-and-patient-access-final-rule-cms-9115-f>

- If the problem requires immediate attention, DentistLink connects the user to a provider who can treat urgent problems.
- **Access to an accurate and frequently updated database of providers:** DentistLink has outreach specialists on staff who continuously reach out to oral health provider office locations across the state to ensure the database of providers is up-to-date and provides accurate information.
 - The outreach specialists verify whether a location is accepting new Apple Health patients, any eligibility criteria, and services offered.
 - When the outreach specialists learn of changes at an oral health provider office location, they update the DentistLink database in real time to ensure clients and referral specialists have accurate information when searching the online database.
- **Referrals to support services:** DentistLink can provide referrals to additional services, such as transportation or childcare resources, to help people be successful in attending their dental appointments.
- **Multilingual referral support:** DentistLink has a Spanish-speaking referral specialist and access to over 300 additional languages using an interpretation service.

Public-private partnership with Arcora Foundation

To collaborate with Arcora Foundation, HCA has agreed to:

- Provide quarterly lists of providers that have billed HCA for rendered dental services within the past 12 months at the time of submission.
- Work in partnership with Arcora Foundation on DentistLink marketing and outreach materials to Apple Health clients, providing funding for printing, translation, collateral, marketing, advertising, and web development.
- Provide billing and enrollment assistance to providers interested in accepting Apple Health.
- Help develop protocols for data analysis to track outcomes.
- Submit reports as required by the Washington State Legislature, in consultation with Arcora Foundation.
- Set up and attend bi-monthly meetings with Arcora Foundation to continuously improve DentistLink.

Arcora Foundation has agreed to:

- Provide the DentistLink platform, including the services and staff to accomplish this work.
- Support public, private, and non-profit partners in the goal of connecting people across the state to dental care, including but not limited to:
 - Federally Qualified Health Centers,
 - County Public Health Departments, and
 - Behavioral Health Organizations.
- Outreach to oral health care providers to:
 - Identify and add oral health care providers not currently in the DentistLink database as accepting new Apple Health enrolled patients.
 - Recruit new providers to accept Apple Health enrolled patients.
 - Connect oral health care providers to tools and technical assistance that will help providers be successful in serving clients enrolled in Apple Health.
- Develop and implement a peer-to-peer recruitment model for oral health care providers to include a support network of experts in serving the populations enrolled in Apple Health.
- Outreach to Apple Health enrollees via advertisements and community partners in collaboration with the HCA communications team, exploring the best and most appropriate tasks for each potential outreach method and role of each partner.
- Attend community events and information fairs to disseminate DentistLink information.
- Develop new referral relationships with community-based organizations, identifying and targeting community-based organizations in regions of the state with low utilization numbers to refer the populations they serve directly to DentistLink.
- Disseminate resource information to DentistLink users including:
 - Interpretation and transportation benefits provided by HCA.
 - Other state and federal programs that may be beneficial.
- Connect with organizations and resources addressing other social determinants of health.
- Maintain and continue to improve the DentistLink website by:
 - Ensuring provider information is accurate and consistent.
 - Improving client experience when finding a provider through DentistLink.
- Track DentistLink utilization.

Arcora report key findings

Arcora Foundation has been tracking DentistLink utilization since July 1, 2021, and HCA provided Arcora Foundation with the deliverables necessary to continue operating DentistLink. HCA has received its latest semiannual report from the Arcora Foundation, covering the dates July 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, and the results are encouraging.

During the reporting period from July 1, 2023, through December 31, 2023, individuals accessed DentistLink 33,033 times, an increase of 7,653 from the same time frame in 2021.

- This does not represent an unduplicated client count. Arcora Foundation endeavors to accurately track unique users utilizing specific identifiers within the DentistLink referral tool.
- However, due to constraints in the data, they cannot provide absolute assurance that certain clients may not be duplicated in the process.
- **Among the individuals accessing DentistLink:**
 - About 96 percent were enrolled in Apple Health.
 - About 83 percent were aged 21 years or older.
 - About 47 percent were looking for an oral health care provider to complete a dental cleaning or have their teeth evaluated. These appeared to be the most common reasons to look for an oral health care provider.
 - Concerns pertaining to pain/toothache, or a broken/chipped tooth made up 21 percent and 19 percent of the requests, respectively.

Arcora Foundation has seven dental professionals participating in the Dental Access Improvement Team (DAIT).

- Most DAIT members are dentists, while the rest are made of auxiliary positions, including registered dental hygienists, denturists, and dental administrative staff.
- The DAIT, with Arcora Foundation members, meet with, educate, and recruit other local dentists to participate in DentistLink and Apple Health.
- COVID-19 restrictions initially limited recruitment efforts to only the eastern side of the state. With restrictions now lifted, DAIT recruitment efforts have expanded to Western Washington counties including King, Pierce, Clark, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties.

When HCA first started the partnership with Arcora Foundation and DentistLink on July 1, 2021, 665 oral health provider office locations were active in DentistLink.

- These locations were providing treatment for clients with Apple Health insurance and accepting new Apple Health clients. Initially, COVID-19 restrictions limited Arcora Foundation's recruitment efforts.
- Since those restrictions have been lifted, Arcora Foundation has focused on recruiting oral health care providers throughout Washington State.

By December 31, 2023, the number of oral health provider office locations remained relatively consistent with 669 active participating locations in DentistLink.

- The Arcora Foundation and its outreach specialists have been actively enlisting more provider locations to participate in DentistLink and Apple Health.
- They have hosted over sixty virtual and in-person meetings to share information. The number of attendees at these meetings ranges from two to more than 1,000.

- Despite such efforts, oral health providers cite low reimbursement rates for adult Apple Health dental services and a burdensome prior authorization process as things that keep them from participating in Apple Health.

Conclusion

In response to ESSB 5187, Section 211(76), HCA contracted with Arcora Foundation to continue a partnership that connects Apple Health clients to dental services and reduces barriers to accessing care through a client referral tool called DentistLink. Throughout the partnership, HCA has ensured DentistLink has the latest information regarding Apple Health providers and dental benefits and services.

DentistLink has seen the number of oral health provider office locations remain consistent with 669 providers accepting Apple Health clients. HCA and Arcora Foundation continue to expand recruitment efforts statewide. DentistLink is most frequently used by people enrolled in Apple Health and aged 21 years or older, typically to find oral health care providers to complete a dental cleaning or receive an evaluation.

Next steps

HCA continues to expand the Dental Access Improvement Team to promote provider:

- Participation in DentistLink, especially in rural areas
- Acceptance of new Apple Health clients.
- Provision of timely access to dental appointments.

DentistLink is an important tool for connecting Apple Health clients and providers. Nevertheless, important barriers to care remain. These barriers include low reimbursement rates and challenging prior authorization processes. Despite significant efforts to recruit new providers to participate in Apple Health and DentistLink, the number of providers has become stagnant while the number of patients seeking dental providers continues to rise.

HCA will continue to work with Arcora Foundation to find new ways to promote DentistLink so more clients can use the service to address their oral health care needs. HCA and Arcora Foundation will continue to develop methods and strategies to strengthen data collection and evaluation metrics for DentistLink.