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Implications of COVID-19 on Safety-Net Oral Health Services

COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the oral health care delivery system in the US
Temporary postponement of health services beginning in March/April 2020 had lasting impacts on all medical and dental providers, but especially on those in the safety-net
Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) were particularly affected by the pandemic
Though most dental practices re-opened by July 2020 (with 90% at pre-pandemic staffing level), 70% at pre-pandemic patient volume level, a survey of dentists in public health settings such as FQHCs found that these practices were not rebounding as quickly as those in the private sector

STUDY OBJECTIVES
To describe challenges posed by the pandemic on the ability of safety-net providers to deliver care to underserved communities.
To identify strategies that enabled delivery during the initial challenging months of 2020.

METHODS
Between May and September 2022, interviews were conducted with 26 key informants (2 CEO/Executive Directors, 6 non-clinical directors, 9 clinical directors, 2 dentists, 4 staff at and patients of community clinics) in 16 states: Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Maryland (SCHC’s 11)
National Health Access (NINDHA) helped identify safety-net organizations to participate.
Researchers interviewed 26 key informants (2 CEO/Executive Directors, 6 non-clinical directors, 9 clinical directors, 2 dentists, 4 dental hygienists, 1 dental assistant, 2 administrative staff about the impact of the pandemic on oral health service delivery and patients’ access to dental services
All interviews transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose V.9.0 for coding and analysis

BACKGROUND
Researchers interviewed 26 key informants (2 CEO/Executive Directors, 6 non-clinical directors, 9 clinical directors, 2 dentists, 4 dental hygienists, 1 dental assistant, 2 administrative staff about the impact of the pandemic on oral health service delivery and patients’ access to dental services
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RESULTS

THEME 1.
Special grant programs and funding for the safety-net were essential to safety-net provider organizations during the pandemic
Many safety-net dental organizations received federal and state assistance during the pandemic
All organizations sought new channels of funding to address the challenge of ongoing state and federal funding cutoffs

THEME 2.
Even though infection control in dentistry is standard procedure, the COVID-19 pandemic required extraordinary precautions, structural alterations to the environment, and strict attention to personal protective equipment (PPE) and dental tools to reduce the possibility of transmission
Organizations had prior experience with outbreaks and were immediately aware of the need for PPE and infection control
Precautions/alterations included environmental adjustments, equipment and instrument modifications, patient precautions, and staff precautions
Dental centers embedded in large health care organizations (e.g., hospitals) instilled early difficulty gaining PPE

THEME 3.
The challenges of the pandemic were not just clinical but also operational: service disruption impacted staff in numerous ways
All staff were impacted (including support staff and administrative personnel)
Some organizations furloughed a large percentage of their clinical and administrative staff
Some organizations continued some benefits for furloughed employees

THEME 4.
When possible, the oral health workforce was redeployed to address further needs in the workforce
When closure of dental centers was required, redeployment of workforce became an option (often possible)
Administrative personnel were more easily shifted to different duties and tasks
Some dental hygienists were assigned dental assisting functions
Staff in one of the dental centers embedded in a hospital were untrained and remained fully employed (but redeployed to other roles)

THEME 5.
It became necessary to find alternative ways of interfacing with patients
Prior experience with mobile and portable dentistry facilitated swift transitions
Teledentistry became an option for nursing home patients who were under strict isolation restrictions
New organizations charged with providing portable dental services in schools to using mobile dental vans outside of schools

REFERENCES

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