

# HEALTH CARE LARAMIE COUNTY RESIDENTS CAN SMILE ABOUT

*By Karim Simisky, HealthWorks*

United Way  
of Laramie County



A healthy smile does more than light up the room. Beyond enhancing our appearance and confidence, oral health is a telling measure of overall health. It can even influence our ability to succeed in society. Imagine being in so much pain from a tooth abscess you can't go to work or focus on your family. Imagine losing teeth from gum disease or decay and not being able to afford crowns or dentures. These are serious problems that affect people's well-being and livelihoods.

Because oral care is fundamental to good health, HealthWorks made it part of its mission to integrate dental care into the clinic's services. A Federally Qualified Health Center and Patient-Centered Medical Home, HealthWorks delivers high quality, culturally sensitive comprehensive primary care regardless of ability to pay. Located in Cheyenne, HealthWorks served approximately 4,000 patients through approximately 12,000 patient visits in 2014, including 1,424 dental visits. More than 750 patients were able to obtain acute dental care from HealthWorks dental providers, in addition to patients seen and treated by HealthWorks medical providers for dental pain prior to seeing the dentist.

United Way of Laramie County's generous support has been instrumental in developing this unique dental program that provides low-cost urgent and preventive dental care. Without these services, Laramie County residents with limited resources would have few options for maintaining their oral health. Instead, the HealthWorks dental program demonstrates how people can improve their lives when they have access to the services they need.

Rural states are notoriously short on dental providers, and Wyoming is no exception. Dental providers are scarce in the area, and many of the practices serving adults do not accept Medicaid because of low reimbursement rates and limited coverage. According to the 2012 Laramie County Comprehensive Needs Assessment, nearly 28% of residents have not had a dental checkup in the past 12 months.

HealthWorks began answering this need when it partnered with the Laramie County Community College (LCCC) dental hygiene program in 2006. The fledgling collaboration began with HealthWorks staff visiting LCCC one day per week to treat patients with acute dental needs. Since then the dental program has grown and flourished, from moving urgent care services to HealthWorks part-time in 2011, to today's comprehensive onsite dental program. LCCC dental hygiene students provide preventive oral health services at HealthWorks under the supervision of the clinic's staff dentist, Dr. Erin Asay. This mutually beneficial arrangement gives patients access to

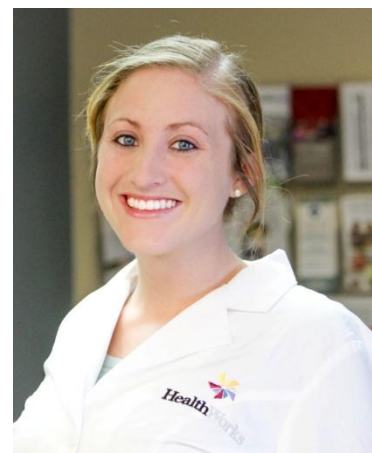
preventive oral care services while allowing students to meet necessary clinical requirements for graduation. Many of the students decide to stay in the community.

The HealthWorks dental clinic offers same-day, urgent care visits whenever possible. Patients who see a medical provider first for acute dental issues are scheduled to follow up with a dentist. Close collaboration between dental and medical providers assures that patients receive timely access to preventive, acute, and restorative oral health services. In particular, an automatic referral process between HealthWorks dental and primary care providers ensures that patients with a higher risk of oral health problems – such as diabetic patients, tobacco users, pregnant women, and children – receive prompt and thorough dental care. HealthWorks also reviews visits to the local emergency room (ER) and schedules follow-up appointments for patients who visited the ER with dental pain and have no regular dentist. Early treatment of acute dental issues reduces medical emergencies and improves patients' overall health.

Last year marked significant growth in the program. HealthWorks hired its first full-time dentist and installed a digital x-ray system that makes expanded restorative services possible, including anterior root canals, on a sliding fee scale for uninsured patients. The health center also added complete and partial denture fabrication, comprehensive care, and pediatric procedures. Since adding denture and pediatric services, HealthWorks has served 43 denture patients and 36 pediatric patients; these numbers continue to grow. More recently, Krista Baker, an LCCC hygiene school graduate, joined HealthWorks as the clinic's first staff dental hygienist. The addition of Krista will allow more patients to receive full comprehensive dental care onsite.

Through the generous support of individual donor Mr. Jim Volk, HealthWorks also provides dentures to roughly eight patients per month. For these patients, dentures improve their oral and overall health and can help overcome socio-economic barriers such as difficulty obtaining employment.

Erin Asay, DDS, HealthWorks Dental Director, sees how the program changes patient's lives every day. She explains, "Recently the clinic got a frantic call from a patient saying she had a broken tooth. We squeezed her in that day for an evaluation and to extract the remnants of the tooth. Right after the appointment we rushed her denture into the lab to add a tooth to fill in the empty space. We got it back on Monday morning and she picked it up on the way to a job interview. That week we got another call saying she got the job! This example is just one of many of the people who benefit from our dental program. These services not only get people out of pain; they also restore the patient's smile in more ways than one."



Erin Asay, DDS