

Expanding access to dental and oral health services for Torontonians

Date: May 12, 2023

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

Toronto Public Health's (TPH) Dental and Oral Health portfolio implements a range of initiatives that improve the health status of Torontonians, with a particular focus on the city's most vulnerable residents. This report provides an overview of TPH's historical and current efforts in this area, and outlines current work to expand service through 1) constructing new TPH-operated dental clinics and renovating existing ones and 2) expanding partnerships with community organizations, hospitals and academic institutions that allow TPH to extend its reach, address community-specific needs, and enhance referral pathways to other health and social services. The report recommends that the Medical Officer of Health be authorized to enter into agreements for the delivery of these services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. City Council authorize the Medical Officer of Health to enter into agreements, on an ongoing basis, with Community Health Centres, Aboriginal Health Access Centres, hospitals, and/or health care agencies, and academic institutions in Toronto for the purpose of delivering mandated dental and oral health services that are fully funded by the Province of Ontario and within the approved Toronto Public Health budget, in accordance with applicable program and funding guidelines, on such terms and conditions that are satisfactory to the Medical Officer of Health and in a form approved by the City Solicitor.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no net financial impact associated with the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

The City of Toronto (the City) approved a final Toronto Public Health 2023 Operating Budget including \$36.6 million for dental and oral health services. This includes approximately \$22.7 million provided by the Province of Ontario (the Province) for the delivery of mandated programs.

COMMENTS

The FDI World Dental Federation defines oral health as multi-faceted and includes the ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow and convey a range of emotions through facial expressions with confidence and without pain, discomfort and disease of the craniofacial complex (head, face, and oral cavity).

The importance of dental and oral health is not limited to the mouth. It impacts the body systemically, with many studies showing a strong correlation between periodontal disease and systemic diseases. For example, periodontal or gum disease results in inflammation in the mouth which can contribute to systemic inflammation in turn contributing to cardiovascular diseases like atherosclerosis. People with diabetes have an increased risk of periodontal disease and treatment of periodontal disease has been shown to improve blood glucose levels. Periodontal disease may also have an impact on lung disease. Lung infections such as pneumonia can be caused by the aspiration of the bacteria which causes periodontal disease. Periodontal disease can also worsen the chronic inflammation in lung diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Poor oral health can also affect self-confidence and social relationships, which are important contributing factors to mental health and well-being.

Toronto Public Health has a long history of working to improve the dental and oral health of Toronto's population, going back over one hundred years. As early as 1914, then-Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Charles Hastings, identified a gap in the Department of Public Health when it came to services for teens, adults and seniors. He noted a desperate need for free dental care for this population. Since then, TPH has implemented and supported a range of prevention-focused interventions to promote dental and oral health, including population level interventions (such as water fluoridation and health education on proper oral care) and direct services to individuals (such as routine dental care for eligible clients).

Additionally, TPH has been the primary dental care provider for the City's low-income population for decades, providing basic clinical interventions such as extractions, restorations, root canals, and dentures, to Torontonians without private insurance and who cannot afford clinical care from a private practice.

Certain dental programs, such as Healthy Smiles Ontario and the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program are a legislative requirement under the Health Promotion and Protection Act (HPPA), as set out in the Oral Health Protocol of 2021. As such, the Provincial Ministry of Health requires TPH deliver programs set out in that protocol.

Who we serve

All orders of government have recognized the importance of dental and oral health to people's overall health and well-being, and have made financial investments accordingly. For example, the Government of Canada recently announced the Canada Dental Benefit, intended to help lower dental costs for eligible families earning less than \$90,000 per year. Parents and guardians can apply if the child receiving dental care is under 12 years old and does not have access to a private dental insurance plan.

At TPH, we receive funding directly from both the provincial and federal governments to deliver a broad range of dental and oral health services to Torontonians, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Provincially and federally-funded dental and oral health services delivered by TPH

Program	Funder	Who is eligible	What it provides
Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program	Province of Ontario (100 percent)	Toronto residents aged 65 years and above	Comprehensive dental care, including regular visits and emergencies
Healthy Smiles Ontario	Province of Ontario (Cost Shared: 70% Province; 30% City of Toronto)	Toronto residents aged 0-17 years	Comprehensive dental care, including regular visits and emergencies
Ontario Works (OW)	Province of Ontario (100 percent)	Toronto residents aged 18-64 years, who are OW recipients	Emergency Care
Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)	Province of Ontario (100 percent)	Toronto residents aged 18-64, who are ODSP recipients	Comprehensive dental care, including regular visits and emergencies
Non-Insured Health Benefits	Government of Canada (100 percent)	Toronto residents who identify as First Nations and Inuit	Comprehensive dental care including regular visits and emergencies
Interim Federal Health	Government of Canada (100 percent)	Residents of Toronto who have refugee status	Emergency Care

Additionally, the City provides funding to expand access to these services to:

- lower-income Toronto residents who are slightly above the income threshold for provincial programs (due to the higher cost of living in Toronto), such as seniors who do not qualify for the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program,
- adults aged 18-24 years who are enrolled full-time in high school,
- perinatal adults, referred by TPH nurses, and
- Ontario Works clients identified as requiring preventive services.

The year prior to the pandemic, from February 2019 to February 2020, we served nearly 28,000 unique clients. During the pandemic emergency, beginning March 2020, many of our staff in the Dental & Oral Health Services program were redeployed to the pandemic response. Yet, given the importance of these services to low-income and underserved residents, TPH still continued to provide a full suite of clinical services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, serving nearly 31,000 unique clients from March 2020 to March 2023.

Toronto Public Health's approach to dental and oral health care

Clinical service delivery

TPH applies a client-centred, minimally invasive, and evidence-based approach in providing dental services to clients. This marks a shift in practice from the traditional surgical approach, which treats only the signs of the disease, to a contemporary chronic disease management approach that treats the underlying issue. This new approach encompasses interventions such as:

- modifying the oral bacteria,
- treating cavities through non-operative and preventative methods,
- prioritizing the repair of restorations before considering replacement, and
- educating clients on the disease process and identifying actions they can take to prevent or control it.

Prioritizing minimally invasive dentistry shifts dentistry away from more expensive and invasive interventions to ultimately improve oral health and overall health, while also avoiding costs.

Oral health screening

As required under the Ontario Public Health Standards, TPH conducts oral health screenings in schools to identify and prevent oral health problems in elementary school students. During the 2018-2019 school year, TPH screened approximately 208,000 of students enrolled in Junior Kindergarten through Grade 8, identifying approximately 8,000 children with urgent dental decay; 20,000 with non-urgent decay; and 60,000 children needing preventive care. Where necessary, TPH assisted families in finding and navigating dental care and improving their oral health knowledge.

Toronto Public Health also provides screening and non-invasive bedside treatments to residents of City-run long-term care homes, and eligible residents of non-profit and private long-term care homes.

Where we deliver dental and oral health services

Toronto Public Health delivers dental and oral health services through its own clinics and by partnering with providers in the community.

City-run dental clinics

Toronto Public Health directly operates 26 dental clinics across the city. These clinics are strategically located to ensure they are accessible to clients, near communities of a high demand, and easily accessible by TTC. Two mobile dental vans supplement the fixed clinics, allowing TPH to bring services directly to clients who may be unable to otherwise access them, such as seniors living in long-term care homes. The mobile dental bus also serves to extend capacity at fixed clinics in areas where there is significant demand, and to provide services at locations that are temporarily closed for repairs or upgrades.

As a result of high demand for dental and oral health services and further investments by the Province, work is underway to improve and expand TPH's fixed clinics through three renovation and four new construction projects. This includes five new clinics in Scarborough that are expected to open in 2023 and 2024, which will help address the significant need for dental care in this part of Toronto.

Achieving greater impact through collaboration

Arrangements with 13 community partners and three hospitals enable TPH to expand its reach beyond what would be possible through standalone, direct service delivery. By co-locating its dental and oral health services with Community Health Centres, TPH is able to tap into existing client networks, reduce barriers to access for local residents and expand referral to other health care services. Similarly, arrangements with hospitals allow TPH to expand referral to acute care services. In other cases, TPH supports dental and oral health services through service agreements with community partners, who are able to apply their community-specific knowledge to tailor service delivery to meet the needs of their clients. Toronto Public Health aims to build on the success of our collaboration with community by increasing the number and depth of our partnerships in the coming years.

Ensuring faster, broader access to dental and oral health services

Toronto Public Health currently has service contracts with partner agencies that support service delivery in the community for provincial programs including the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program and Healthy Smiles Ontario. Purchasing services from community agencies is an effective and efficient way to provide essential public health services. This approach builds on existing service infrastructure in the community, facilitates community partnerships, supports continuity of service to clients, and maximizes service efficiencies.

Under the Ministry of Health's Public Health Funding and Accountability Agreement, TPH may enter into contractual partnerships with organizations to provide eligible OSDCP seniors with specialty dental services that are part of the OSDCP service

schedule, but unavailable through Public Health Units. Both the OPHS and this agreement include funding and service delivery requirements to which TPH is required to adhere. Toronto Public Health reports annually to the Board of Health and City Council on its service agreements with partners.

Currently, TPH must seek City Council approval on a case-by-case basis to enter into new capital funding and purchase of service agreements to flow funds from the Province to service delivery partners. Given the pressing need to expand access to dental and oral health services in Toronto, and the robust accountability frameworks that exist, this report recommends that City Council grant the Medical Officer of Health authority to enter into agreements with service deliver partners for the purpose of delivering mandated services that are fully-funded by the Province. This will streamline the service expansion process and provide more timely access to dental and oral health services for eligible Torontonians.

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SIGNATURE

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