

Mobile Dental Care Program: 2025 Update

Date: August 23, 2024

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The Dental and Oral Health Services program at Toronto Public Health provides integral dental and oral health care to vulnerable populations in Toronto. The Ontario Public Health Standards and the [Oral Health Screening Protocol, 2021](#) specify the mandatory oral health services to be offered by local public health units.

As part of achieving its plan to promote health and well-being across the lifespan and advance health equity, Toronto Public Health offers a mobile dental program that currently includes two mobile dental vans and a mobile dental bus focused on supporting harder to reach populations. The mobile dental bus has been in operation since 2012, and the interior and exterior of the bus has significantly declined over the past year.

This report makes recommendations to decommission and auction the mobile dental bus and return funds collected to the provincial Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health provided the funds for the bus in 2011 through the Healthy Smiles Ontario program. A parallel request to City Council for capital funding to purchase a new mobile dental van to replace the bus is coming forward through the 2025 Budget process.

The report has been reviewed by the Fleet Services Division and Finance and Treasury Services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to decommission the mobile dental bus and work with the Fleet Services Division to initiate a process

to auction the bus and return any recovered funds from the auction after netting associated costs to the provincial Ministry of Health.

2. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to include \$460 thousand, fully funded by the discretionary Reserve Fund for Public Health, in the 2025-2034 Capital Budget and Plan Submission for Toronto Public Health to purchase a new mobile dental van.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Fleet Services Division estimates that a total of \$40 to \$50 thousand, after netting associated costs, could be recovered through the auction of the dental bus. Since the provincial Ministry of Health covered 100 per cent of the original costs of the mobile dental bus, funds collected from auctioning the bus after netting associated costs would need to be returned to the provincial Ministry of Health, with no financial impact to the City.

A new mobile dental van is estimated to cost \$460 thousand. Toronto Public Health will include \$460 thousand, fully funded by the discretionary Reserve Fund for Public Health, in the 2025-2034 Capital Budget and Plan Submission to purchase the recommended new mobile dental van.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on February 14, 2024, City Council amended and deemed approved item MPB15.1 "2024 Capital and Operating Budgets", and thereby approved a 2024 Operating Budget for Toronto Public Health of \$278.9 million gross and \$77.7 million net, including \$36.6 million for the Dental and Oral Health Services Program. This includes approximately \$22.7 million provided by the Province of Ontario for the delivery of mandated dental and oral health programs.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MPB15.1>

COMMENTS

The World Health Organization recognizes that oral health is the state of the mouth, teeth, and orofacial structures that impact eating, breathing, and speaking, and that oral health impacts psychosocial factors, such as self-confidence, well-being, and the capacity to socialize and work without pain and discomfort.¹ Across the life span, oral health conditions and need for care can vary. Public health and oral health interventions are targeted depending on the population.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/oral-health>

Oral health disease disproportionately impacts marginalized populations, including children, seniors in long-term care facilities, Indigenous people, new immigrants with refugee status, people with special needs, and the low-income population.²

Toronto Public Health Strategic Impact

The recommendations of this report will provide increased access to dental treatment and oral health care across the city and align with the following priorities of the TPH Strategic Plan 2024-2028:

1. Strengthen health protection, disease prevention and emergency preparedness, including meeting the objective of effectively communicating with the public about how they can protect their health.
2. Promote health and well-being across the lifespan, including meeting the objective to reduce the burden of chronic and infectious diseases across the lifespan and meeting the objective to prioritize effective interventions for children and youth to meet their changing needs.
3. Promote the conditions to support positive mental health and reduce the harms of substance use, including meeting the objective to deliver public health interventions that promote mental health.
4. Advocate to advance health equity, including meeting the objective to collaborate with partners across multiple sectors to address local health needs.

Dental and Oral Health Services: Program Overview

At the time of this report, there are 24 brick-and-mortar dental clinics in Toronto operated by Toronto Public Health (TPH). By the spring of 2025, there will be a total of 26 dental clinics operated by TPH, accounting for the opening of three new dental clinics and the closure of the dental clinic at 277 Victoria Street. Eligible children, adults aged 18-64, and seniors aged 65 and older can access care at TPH dental clinics.

All orders of government recognize the importance of dental and oral health and the value of publicly funded dental services. TPH receives funding directly from municipal, provincial, and federal governments to deliver these services, as outlined in Table 1.

2 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9510506/>

Table 1: Provincially and federally funded dental and oral health services delivered by Toronto Public Health

Program	Funder	Who is eligible	What it provides
Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program	Province of Ontario (100 per cent)	Low-income 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)	Low-income Toronto residents aged 0-17 years	Comprehensive dental care, including regular visits and emergencies
Ontario Works (OW)	Province of Ontario (100 per cent)	Toronto residents aged 18-64 years, who are OW recipients	Emergency Care
Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)	Province of Ontario (100 per cent)	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 per cent)	Toronto residents who identify as First Nations and Inuit	Comprehensive dental care including regular visits and emergencies
Interim Federal Health	Government of Canada (100 per cent)	Residents of Toronto who have refugee status	Emergency Care

Mobile Dental Bus

Since 2012, Toronto Public Health has been operating a mobile dental bus to offer dental treatment and oral health services to vulnerable communities across the city. The bus was purchased with provincial capital dollars for \$440 thousand. The bus is outfitted with all the equipment and materials that can be found in a brick-and-mortar clinic with the ability to travel to community organizations and health services such as shelters, food banks, long-term care services, and other social services. The bus brought mobile dental treatment to approximately 800 patients annually.

In March 2020, the mobile bus paused operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fall of 2022, the bus resumed operations in a new capacity as clinical extension support for brick-and-mortar dental clinics undergoing renovations, including clinics at 150 Borough Drive, 2660 Eglinton Ave East, and 5100 Yonge Street.

Since 2022, the bus has experienced numerous mechanical and equipment issues, including to the interior dental equipment. While the bus has a mobile wheelchair lift, it is

now broken, rendering the bus non-compliant with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA).

Decommissioning the Mobile Dental Bus and Anticipated Service Impacts

This report recommends that the Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to decommission the bus and initiate a process with Fleet Services Division to auction the bus in October 2024. Dental equipment within the bus would either be brought into dental clinics or, if no longer clinically useful, discarded.

At this time, there are no anticipated service level impacts from decommissioning and auctioning the bus. The bus has been used since 2022 to support service delivery at dental clinics undergoing renovations, and all dental clinic renovations are expected to be complete by the Fall of 2024.

Future of Mobile Dental Program

Toronto Public Health recommends replacing the dental bus with a mobile dental van and requesting municipal capital funds to support the purchase through the 2025 capital budget process. Since 2019, provincial Ministry of Health capital funding has been used to build new brick-and-mortar dental clinics, significantly expanding access to dental care and treatment for residents of Toronto. At this time, the provincial Ministry of Health has indicated that there are no capital funds available for new dental projects.

Since 2023, two mobile dental vans have been used to provide oral health screening and dental care to City-operated long-term care homes. These vans have been successful at delivering high-quality, client-centred care to seniors across the city. In addition to the need to decommission the bus, the smaller vans are much easier to operate and manoeuvre throughout the city, as the vans do not require special permits or a Class D driver's license to operate.

A new dental van would allow TPH to expand access to dental treatment to vulnerable populations who may experience barriers to dental services. The proposed service plan for the new van would include connecting with shelters and community and social services to reach adults aged 18-64, some youth (e.g., those staying in shelters), and some seniors (adjacent to long-term care homes). The dental program team would work with relevant stakeholders to develop an outreach schedule to maximize access to dental services across the city.

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SIGNATURE

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