

Is Iowa ready to meet the oral health needs of the Silver Tsunami?

IT'S A FACT: the number of Americans age 65 and older is increasing rapidly thanks to the Baby Boomer generation and public health measures that have increased our lifespan. In 2016, 15 percent of Americans were 65 or older, projected to be at 20 percent by 2030. The rate in Iowa is even higher, with 16 percent of Iowans age 65 or older in 2016, projected to be 23 percent in 2030.

It is this current and anticipated growth in the number of older Americans that is now dubbed as the “Silver Tsunami”. The upcoming Silver Tsunami will impact the economy, real estate and housing industry, and the health care system – including dentistry. The new cohort of older Americans will likely have had more preventive dental care and invested in more comprehensive restorative treatment than past generations, and as a result, retained more of their natural teeth that they will want to maintain.

Due to changes in health, fixed incomes, and limitations in the ability to pay for regular dental care, many older Americans may experience growing dental needs. A 2016 survey found that of older Iowans who had a dental problem in the past 12 months who would have liked to have seen a dentist, over two-thirds indicated cost as the main reason they did not visit the dentist.

“I went to the emergency room for a dental infection and was prescribed an antibiotic. I can’t afford dental care and will continue using the emergency room for dental issues.”

- 79-year-old in west central Iowa

Poor oral health impacts the ability to chew, swallow, and speak and can lead to tooth loss, malnutrition, inflammation, and decreased self-esteem. The Administration on Aging acknowledges that barriers in

access to oral health care for seniors include the cost of care, living on a fixed income, not having dental insurance (including a lack of dental inclusion in Medicare), and transportation and mobility limitations.

Since 2013, several individuals and organizations in Iowa have met as the Lifelong Smiles Coalition, to prepare for the growing oral health needs of older Iowans. Members come from advocacy organizations, health professions, state agencies, academic institutions, and trade associations and are working together to find strategies that will reduce barriers to dental care and optimal oral health for older Iowans.

“As a veteran, I was disappointed to discover that as I entered the nursing home, my veteran’s benefits that covered the cost of my nursing home did not cover dental benefits. Even though I financially qualify for Medicaid which does cover dental health, I am ineligible because I am a veteran.”

- 70-year-old in eastern Iowa

Coalition projects include:

- Endorsing the [Mouth Care Matters](#) training – a hands-on curriculum for the direct care (and other health care) workforce to improve oral care skills
- Endorsing the [I-Smile™ Silver](#) program – a pilot project in Calhoun, Des Moines, Hamilton, Humboldt, Lee, Pocahontas, Scott, Van Buren, Webster, and Wright Counties, using I-Smile™ Silver coordinators (housed in the Lee, Scott, and Webster County Health Departments) who are helping Iowans access care, prevent dental disease, and maintain overall health.
- Endorsing the Office of Education and Training at the [University of Iowa College of Dentistry](#), which provides and promotes continuing education opportunities about dental care for older Iowans
- Developing and distributing [information](#) about planning for lost dental benefits at retirement
- Promoting the importance of older Iowans’ oral health through presentations and displays at health conferences
- Maintaining a [website](#) and [Facebook page](#) to reach the public with messages about the importance of oral health
- Identifying strategies to improve access to dental care for Medicaid participants
- Sharing coalition strategies and successes with legislators and policymakers

Are **you** prepared for the impact of Iowa’s Silver Tsunami? Would you like to be part of the solution? Please visit www.LifelongSmilesCoalition.com or email us at lifelongsmilescoalition@gmail.com to find out how you can get involved.