

THE PROBLEM

People with intellectual disabilities often have oral health issues that go undiagnosed and untreated. Results from 22,100 Special Smiles screenings conducted in 2016 with Special Olympics athletes showed that 39.2% had untreated tooth decay, 27.3% had missing teeth, 16.7% received an urgent referral, 46.9% had gingival signs, and 15.4% had mouth pain.¹ There are many reasons for these health issues, including the fact that many oral health professionals are not properly trained on how to interact with, diagnose or treat people with intellectual disabilities. Also, health promotion and prevention initiatives rarely target people with disabilities. The high cost of specialized services, such as dental care, also lead to the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities from participating in mainstream health services, and this exclusion often limits access to even routine care for people with intellectual disabilities.

THE SOLUTION

Special Olympics Arkansas, in partnership with Delta Dental of Arkansas and Delta Dental of Arkansas Foundation, held a day-long training for 96 oral health professionals. The goal of the training was to teach the dentists, hygienists, assistants and students participating how to provide quality care to adults and children with intellectual disabilities in their professional practices. Education focused on the specific health needs of people with intellectual disabilities, fears and barriers to providing quality care, making office environments and practices more inclusive and accessible, and effective patient and caregiver communication. The training concluded with hands-on experience working with people with intellectual disabilities during a Special Olympics Special Smiles screening event. Participants attending this training were offered eight hours of continuing education credits.

OUTCOME

Prior to this training, 30% of participants did not feel adequately prepared to work with patients with intellectual disabilities. Post-training survey results showed 95% of participants felt more comfortable working with people with intellectual disabilities, 97% felt better able to provide better care for patients with intellectual disabilities, and 87% planned to pursue additional educational opportunities to learn more about people with intellectual disabilities. Course participants are now listed in Delta Dental's recommended medical provider network for people with intellectual disabilities.

[1] Healthy Athletes Prevalence Report (2016)