

Who is Working Well Together?

DentaQuest Foundation

Aiming to build a national movement, funder focused on oral health supports learning communities of grantees.

Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Private foundation
Geography/Issue Area	National/Oral health
When founded	1999
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$76 million
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$13.5 million
Number of staff	10
Website	www.dentaquestfoundation.org
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Learning communities as core elements of several national grantmaking initiatives on oral health.

1. Describe the situation or practice.

The DentaQuest Foundation (formerly the Oral Health Foundation) was established in 1999 in Massachusetts and expanded nationally beginning in 2009 to improve the oral health of people across the United States. The foundation collaborates with local and national partners to shape solutions in four key system areas: health policy, financing of oral health care and prevention, accessible and affordable oral health care and community-based resources.

As the foundation started planning its expansion from a primarily local funder to a national funder in the last decade, it began to embrace the importance of creating learning communities of grantees to share solutions and pursue opportunities for collaboration.

Managing Director Brian Souza explained the shift in thinking: “During the foundation’s first decade, we focused primarily on equipment and infrastructure grants to expand access to care for traditionally underserved populations. While important work, the foundation also wanted to explore applying its resources to addressing the underlying systems issues that were

the root causes of disparities in access to oral health care and oral health status.” Over time, the foundation’s board and staff came to believe that widespread progress on oral health would only be possible if there was an infrastructure to support a national and local network of change agents.

2. What have you tried to do differently?

Learning communities are at the heart of four key funding initiatives of the DentaQuest Foundation:

- ***Building on National Convening Power.*** The U.S. National Oral Health Alliance is a stand-alone nonprofit formed with funding from the DentaQuest Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to provide a forum where leaders can come together to work on improving access to oral health. The Alliance serves as a platform for leaders from various sectors — including federal and state government, organized dentistry, academia, industry, payers and public health — to come together in a series of colloquia to build common ground and shared messaging on priority areas from prevention and public health infrastructure to financing models.
- ***Funding State-Based Network.*** Oral Health 2014 is a DentaQuest Foundation initiative that supports state-based organizations working to bring about systems change in the same priority areas of the U.S. National Oral Health Alliance. The foundation supports grantees to gather face-to-face two to four times per year and virtually each month on grantee-led webinars to build capacity in areas such as stakeholder engagement, collaborative planning, advocacy, communications and health equity.
- ***Strengthening the Oral Health Safety Net.*** This DentaQuest Foundation initiative supports the National Association of Community Health Centers, the National Network for Oral Health Access and 16 primary care associations at the state level to help them improve access to oral care among medically underserved populations. Similar to other programs supported by the grantmaker, grantees come together face-to-face twice per year and virtually on a regular basis for capacity building on a variety of topics and to share common challenges and resources for improvement.
- ***Building Local Leadership.*** The National Interprofessional Initiative on Oral Health initiative — funded by the DentaQuest Foundation, the Washington Dental Service Foundation and the Connecticut Health Foundation — is engaging national professional associations in nursing, pediatrics, physician assisting, family medicine and OB/GYN in adopting a formal commitment to oral health. The initiative

prioritizes and supports learning as a core element of its work, convening all professions at an annual symposium as well as individual professions at summits and symposia to share knowledge and solutions.

The Foundation's lead technical assistance partner for these and other initiatives is the Interaction Institute for Social Change, which plays a key role in growing and sustaining its learning communities. Souza said the DentaQuest Foundation is seeking to build and weave a national network of oral health advocates who are coming together regularly — both virtually and in person in gatherings designed and facilitated by IISC — in a national community of practice and learning.

“Our grantees are sharing experts, resources and ideas in ways we would never have imagined, and it shows what happens when you break down the siloes that keep people from collaborating.”

— Brian Souza, Managing Director

3. What has been the result?

By convening and building the capacity of diverse groups of stakeholders at the local, regional and national levels, the DentaQuest Foundation has fostered common understanding of key challenges facing the systems, as well as a vision for how those systems could best function to improve the oral health of all.

“Fairly quickly, specific shared solutions surfaced that had demonstrated promise in shaping health policy to support oral health, in better aligning financing for care, in improving the delivery of care to maximize access and prioritize prevention and in strengthening community supports that improve oral health,” Souza said.

Among the results to date:

- More states are implementing effective models to increase oral disease prevention, assessment and treatment for at-risk children (in programs like Head Start) that have proved effective elsewhere.
- State organizations are sharing strategies to influence policy on oral health related to the implementation of the Affordable Care Act.
- The common ground messaging of the U.S National Oral Health Alliance is influencing efforts within the federal government to shape national planning on oral health.

- The common curriculum, Smiles for Life, has spread across the country to train thousands (nearly 8,000 in 2013) of primary care providers in oral health in new states.
- Partners across states are sharing technical and expert resources. One example of how this is happening occurred when one state was facing a threat to community water fluoridation. Within days, resources and strategies to fend off the threat were shared across state lines, and experts from one state traveled to present at hearings in another state.

4. What are your key insights from doing the work?

Souza said grantees are not often accustomed to a grantmaker getting deeply involved in helping them connect to others doing similar work. “As a nonprofit, you get used to a certain relationship with a foundation, so many of them were shocked, some pleasantly and some nervously, about this new approach,” he said.

While the foundation took a lead role in planning learning opportunities and convenings at the outset, it quickly engaged grantees and partners in these responsibilities, increasing their ownership of these efforts. Rather than solely defining its relationship as grantmaker and grantee, the foundation made explicit efforts to talk about the work as a partnership.

Souza added that some grantees initially felt overwhelmed by the volume of work and interactions associated with their involvement in these learning communities. “But we quickly saw that anxiety subside to the point where they are now beginning to run the show themselves,” Souza said.

Funders Can Learn Together, Too

At the same time that it provides opportunities for grantees to be part of collaborative learning communities, the DentaQuest Foundation makes certain it is practicing what it preaches. The foundation is one of more than two dozen national and regional philanthropic organizations that meet quarterly as a Funders Oral Health Policy Group. Participating organizations are strong and active voices in community health and national health policy discussions. Through collaboration, they are creating new opportunities for public-private partnerships focused on systems change for better oral health in communities across the United States. The DentaQuest Foundation is the fiscal agent for this group. See more at: <http://dentaquestfoundation.org/programs-partnerships/national-partnerships/funders-oral-health-policy-group>.