



# Strengthening Access to Oral Health: Chicago's DentEquity Network

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In Chicago, families with Medicaid coverage often face significant barriers to finding dental care. Even when children are identified through the Chicago Department of Public Health's school-based oral health program as needing treatment, connecting them to a community dental home is far from simple. Many parents report being turned away by providers who don't accept Medicaid—or not knowing where to go at all.

The Oral Health Forum (OHF), led by Director Alejandra Valencia, had long sought a better way to ensure that children actually received the care they were referred for. *"We could tell families what they needed," Valencia shared, "but we had no way to measure whether that connection ever happened."*

## **The Approach**

To close this gap, OHF launched DentEquity, an IRIS Community designed specifically for dental providers. The network acts as a bridge between the city's school-based screenings and community-based dental homes, making it possible to track when and how families connect to care.

While some IRIS Communities include many types of services across a range of sectors, DentEquity intentionally brings together a targeted circle of dental providers, including Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and pediatric and specialty dentists, who are committed to serving families with Medicaid coverage. Care coordinators at OHF use IRIS to refer families directly to these providers, and those offices take responsibility for reaching out to the families rather than requiring parents to navigate complex systems on their own.

The Oral Health Forum also partners with the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) College of Dentistry, which operates a community dental clinic that serves as an access point for families without a dental home. Families seen there can later be referred through DentEquity to a provider closer to home, ensuring connections continue beyond an immediate visit.

## **The Impact**

Since its launch, DentEquity has created a clearer pathway for hundreds of families in Chicago to receive needed dental treatment. By using IRIS, OHF can now document referral outcomes, track provider responsiveness, and understand where barriers remain. Providers report that the network

makes follow-up simpler and more efficient, while families benefit from direct outreach rather than being left to find care alone.

*“Dentists have to see the whole picture,” Valencia said. “It’s not just about telling a parent to make an appointment—it’s about understanding the challenges families face and helping them take that next step.”*

Through partnerships with Chicago Public Schools, the Department of Public Health, and local clinics, OHF and DentEquity are modeling what equitable oral health access can look like: a system where families are supported from the first screening through successful treatment—and where no child falls through the cracks.