

Puerto Rico: Maternal and Child Health— Improving Oral Health Integration Demonstration Project

The Maternal and Child Health—Improving Oral Health Integration Demonstration Project (Puerto Rico [PR] project) is one of eight Maternal and Child Health—Improving Oral Health Integration (MCH-IOHI) projects funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau to advance the integration of preventive oral health care (POHC) into primary care to make POHC more accessible for their target population—infants, children, adolescents, and pregnant women, including those with special health care needs, who are at risk for poor oral health.

The PR project team is implementing a two-tier, jurisdiction-level and local-level approach to improve access to oral health care for pregnant women and infants and children from birth to age 4 who receive care in participating community health centers (CHCs).

Partners

The PR project is led by the University of Puerto Rico, Medical Sciences Campus, School of Dental Medicine. The project team formed the Puerto Rico MCH-IOHI Alliance, a maternal and child oral health work group established within the Puerto Rico Oral Health Coalition, to provide guidance and recommendations to the project team. The alliance workgroup includes professional organizations such as the Puerto Rico Society of Pediatric Dentistry, the College of Dental Surgeons of Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rico Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Puerto Rican Society of Pediatrics; academic institutions such as the University of Puerto Rico School of Dental Medicine, Ana G. Méndez University, and Ponce Health Sciences University; government agencies such as the Puerto Rico Department of Health, the Puerto Rico Department of Family Affairs, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program; as well as private entities, including health insurance providers.



Jurisdiction-Level Approach

The project team's jurisdiction-level approach aims to advance three core functions (policy and practice; outreach and education; and data, analysis, and evaluation) to promote integrated POHC for the target population.



Core Function Activities

Policy and Practice

The project team, in collaboration with the jurisdiction's Medicaid administrator, completed an environmental scan to gain knowledge about factors that could impact the integration of oral health care into primary care for the target population in Puerto Rico. The scan included questions focused on medical providers' and dental providers' scope of practice, Medicaid billing and payment, and policies and regulations. Selected findings include:

- Medical providers and medical team members can perform a caries risk assessment. However, medical providers and medical team members, including physicians, physician assistants, and advanced practice nurses, cannot apply fluoride varnish or silver diamine fluoride (SDF).
- Dental hygienists can perform a caries risk assessment and apply fluoride varnish and SDF under the general supervision of a dentist.
- Dental hygienists and dental assistants must be supervised by a dentist, regardless of the setting.
- PR does not reimburse oral health providers for applying SDF.
- Dentists can use and be reimbursed by Medicaid for both synchronous and asynchronous teledentistry.

The project team used the *Capacity Inventory for Integrating Oral Health Care into Primary Care for Children: Tool* and *Capacity Inventory for Integrating Oral Health Care into Primary Care for Pregnant Women: Tool* to identify policy and practice improvement opportunities. The team selected four policy and practice strategies to address during the 4-year project period to improve access to oral health care for the target population:

- Foster and empower medical-dental champions within local practice settings and the Puerto Rico Oral Health Coalition.
- Enhance collaborative efforts among organizations within the Puerto Rico Oral Health Coalition, and expand membership to strengthen collective impact.
- Advance health provider education and training for medical providers and dental providers by integrating maternal and child oral health topics across professional organizations' curricula and accredited continuing education courses.
- Promote the standardization of an oral health certificate for infants and children from birth to age 4 before enrollment in a Head Start program, Early Head Start program, or child care program.

In addition, the project team produced the document [Lo que debe conocer de salud oral](#) [What You Should Know About Oral Health] (2025). It was printed and provided to the Puerto Rico College of Dental Surgeons, a professional organization, collaborator, and member of the Puerto Rico Oral Health Coalition, which visited legislators' offices as part of a lobby day on August 25, 2025.

Education and Outreach

The project team aims to improve oral health literacy across Puerto Rico using an organizational health literacy approach. The team is conducting an oral health literacy knowledge gaps analysis among medical providers and dental providers from health organizations who are part of the Puerto Rico MCH-IOHI Alliance. The team will also assess oral health literacy among Early Head Start program and Head Start program staff, private child care center staff, and parents and other caregivers to assess oral health knowledge and its impact on oral health status.



The project team's dental champion developed two presentations, one on oral health for pregnant and lactating women and another on maternal and child oral health, to share with medical providers and dental providers during conferences and meetings. Both presentations are accredited for continuing medical education credits for medical providers and dental providers.

Data, Analysis, and Evaluation

The project team aims to improve Puerto Rico's oral health surveillance system to better monitor disparities in oral health status and burden of oral disease among the maternal and child health population, particularly for the target population. The team coordinated with key partners to complete the capacity inventory tools, environmental scan, and gaps analysis to identify areas for system improvements, and it is working to strengthen the data infrastructure.

Local-Level Approach

The project team is working with three primary care clinics that are part of Salud Integral en la Montaña (SIM), the largest CHC in Puerto Rico, to implement an evidence-based model of care for integrating POHC into primary care for the target population. The clinics have co-located medical and dental clinics.

The team's local-level approach incorporates activities in three core function areas: policy and practice; outreach and education; and data, analysis, and evaluation.

Core Function Activities

Policy and Practice

The project team is working with SIM's medical director, dental director, data manager, marketing team, community outreach coordinator, and medical records director to plan, initiate, support, and monitor project activities. The team identified opportunities to integrate oral health risk assessments and evaluations and dental referrals into workflows for clinical patient encounters during prenatal care and well-child visits. The team is supporting providers and staff at primary care clinics to implement changes over time.

Education and Outreach

The project team conducted an oral health knowledge and skills gaps analysis with medical providers at participating clinics. Results from the analysis informed a training plan and the development of educational materials. The team produced a pocket guide to support prenatal care and pediatric providers when performing oral health risk assessments and evaluations. The team also created a one-page information



sheet about oral health for prenatal care and pediatric providers to share with patients and families, guiding them toward establishing self-management goals. A dental directory was also produced to help pregnant women who have been referred for oral health care locate a dentist. The team will update the directory as it identifies dentists in other municipalities. The project team also participated in several large community health fairs, in collaboration with the participating CHC, to provide oral health education sessions and materials to community members.

Data, Analysis, and Evaluation

The project team collaborated with SIM's data manager and medical records director to analyze the electronic health record (EHR) system and develop a module for documenting POHC in primary care and dental clinics. The module is available to all clinical staff. The project team is testing the module with one site, with plans to replicate it in all CHC sites after the testing phase is completed and any needed improvements are made. In addition, the team coordinated with the site to provide aggregated project metrics monthly, allowing for performance monitoring over time.

Early Successes/Lessons Learned

- Securing leadership buy-in within CHCs is essential to driving organizational change and achieving sustainable success. The project successfully integrated a dental module into the EHR, which includes structured fields for oral health risk assessment, screenings, and goal setting.
- Facilitating in-person meetings with multiple key stakeholders at SIM and its primary care clinics is crucial for effectively assessing existing workflows, identifying opportunities for oral health integration, and developing effective tools.

Early Challenges

- Puerto Rico dental law restricts the delegation of certain POHC services, such as applying fluoride varnish and SDF, exclusively to dentists and to dental hygienists and dental assistants working under a dentist's direct supervision.
- Access to data, particularly insurance claims data, is limited. This limitation hindered early attempts to analyze current needs, capacities, and resources in the jurisdiction.

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