Health Center Oral Health Program Promising Practice

Submitted By: Harbor Health Services
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Adding Mobile Dental Services to a Pediatrics Clinic

Organization:
Harbor Health Services, Inc.

Summary:
Harbor Health Services in Massachusetts identified the need for dental services at one of their primary location health centers which lacked a co-located dental clinic. The site’s pediatric medical patients who needed dental treatment were referred off-site to one of the health center’s other locations. This proved to be a barrier for many patients and their caregivers. With a clear need for dental services for the pediatric patients seen in the medical department, Harbor Health Services decided to create a dual use space within the existing medical clinic. Because the site did not have space to build a new area for dental, a pediatric room in the medical clinic was assigned a dual purpose as a dental operatory. There was capacity within the pediatric medical clinic to allow one of the medical rooms to be used for dental services during certain clinical sessions. Harbor Health Services purchased portable dental equipment for the room.

To staff the new service, a dentist and dental assistant from one of Harbor Health’s other locations travel to this site to provide preventive and diagnostic dental services. In addition to the newly purchased equipment, the location uses a portable x-ray unit as well. Documentation is completed with a laptop, entered into an electronic health record that is viewable at all dental locations. If the patient needs restorative care, the patient is referred to a pediatric dentist in the community or to Harbor Health Services’ nearby dental site. The dental site is located 8 miles away from the pediatrics clinic. The dentist is at the pediatric clinic for two or three sessions a week. For days when the dentist is not there, the portable dental equipment is covered and set to the side so that the room can be used by the medical providers. This allows the health center site to be used at full capacity even when dental is not on site.

Recently, the Massachusetts state dental regulations were clarified to allow a public health dental hygienist (PHDH) to practice with a community health center. This provider will be able to bill their dental visits to Medicaid and perform services under a collaborative written agreement with a licensed dentist even when there is no dentist on site. Based on these updated regulations, Harbor Health Services intends on utilizing a PHDH in the future for the dental site in the pediatrics clinic.

The dental site is projected to see about 250 patients in 2019. Prior to the dental operatory being embedded in the pediatrics clinic, there was minimal communication between medical and dental since there was not a dental provider at that site. As a result of this project, there is increased communication between the two departments. At the start of this program, there was
some resistance from the providers at the pediatrics site. However, Harbor Health Services was able to identify a pediatric medical champion at the site who supported the program during the pilot phase. With the support of the pediatric medical champion and increased collaboration from this project, there is now less resistance from providers.

As an added benefit of having a dentist in the pediatric medical clinic, many of the barriers to the medical team applying topical fluoride varnish have also been addressed.

Harbor Health Services is looking for funding opportunities to replicate this program at other sites because of the success of the current program.

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