

The Oral Health Initiative

Beginning in 2004, VNA worked in partnership with Erie Family Health Center to facilitate increased access to oral health services for medically underserved individuals and families. One year later and with collaboration from other local health foundations, the **Oral Health Initiative** was launched and services were piloted at Erie's Albany Park office.

By starting as a small pilot effort and building from there, Erie had the opportunity to: explore outreach to an underserved and hard-to-reach population, implement oral health education and cross training for its primary healthcare providers, build an advisory group to plan expansion, and ultimately show HRSA and the local funding world that it had the capability to provide oral health services on a large scale.

With continued VNA support, totaling \$137,000 over four years, Erie established fully integrated oral health and primary care services at its Humboldt Park clinic, and as a result its patient population was more effectively served through a combined medical and dental home. Patients received anticipatory guidance and wellness information from both dental and medical providers; they began applying better health practices to their lifestyles and behavior (e.g., brushing, avoiding baby bottle tooth decay); and their oral health improved, which helped to decrease disparities in the Latino community.

Erie has also been able to make a significant contribution to the knowledge of community-based dentistry. The Oral Health Initiative helped it to develop a program that is financially sound, employs an effective staffing model, is run from a state-of-the-art facility, and offers a preventive model of care to ensure oral health in the long term. Erie has shared its model and successes with other FQHCs through several state and national presentations, and it has become a nationally recognized leader in safety net oral healthcare.