

Changing Lives in Savannah By Reimagining Adult Oral Health

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Lynn Mack is 60 years old, grew up in Savannah, and tried to live a normal life despite having missing teeth for 25 years that caused him embarrassment and shame. He accepted his situation because of his fear of dentists, and learned to live with the missing teeth. Oftentimes Lynn would not look directly at people when talking or would shield his mouth with his hand because of this shame. The shame of missing teeth and Lynn's perception that people would not hire him because of his appearance resulted in difficulty finding employment as he grew older. As an adult, he had no dental insurance and could not afford dental care, but his pride prevented him from asking for help. One day, he had a conversation with a dental professional who attends church with him, Dr. Becky Aspinwall. While the work needed was outside the scope of her practice, she knew a colleague who could help Lynn. Dr. Eric Gladden, a general dentist at Gladden Dental, agreed to help Lynn regain his smile and change his life. Because of the pro bono services provided by Dr. Gladden, Lynn – a positive person by nature – was overcome when he first saw his smile in a mirror. Lynn now has a job in retail, and he just beams with confidence as he serves his customers.

Dr. Gladden and his colleagues recognize that there is “a hole in the system for adults” and want to do their part to give back to their community but can't always find a way to participate while allowing them to maintain their own practices and personal lives. As Dr. Gladden said, “Savannah needs a physical place where uninsured adults can receive care with no financial barriers.” Dr. Gladden also emphasized that “many oral health professionals, such as dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants, want to give back to their community but do not have a convenient vehicle to do so.”

“Many dental health professionals...want to give back to their community...”

In January 2020, a group of dentists and health professionals in Savannah, including the authors of this article, formed an Adult Oral Health Committee, sponsored by the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council, to address the “hole in the system,” as Dr. Eric Gladden described it, for uninsured and underserved adults that preclude equitable access to affordable dental services.

According to the “The Burden of Oral Health in Georgia,”¹ from the Georgia Department of Public Health, oral diseases are major public health problems that affect many adults in most communities in Georgia. These problems can have high individual, social, and economic consequences if not addressed and ameliorated through regular self-care and regular professional treatment. Adults with the greatest burden of poor oral health are those who are economically disadvantaged, lack insurance, or are members of racial and ethnic minorities.²



Lynn Mack, Savannah, GA

The Oral Health Committee, utilizing Georgia Southern University students from the Waters College of Health Professions, completed a local needs assessment survey of almost 600 uninsured and underinsured adults. Following are some high-level findings:

- ~ Almost **60% of respondents had NOT seen a dentist in over 12 months**, primarily because they cannot afford existing services. The CDC-500 Cities Project in 2016 found similar results for Savannah, placing it in the lowest quartile nationally for adult use of dentists.
- ~ Effectively, **72% of respondents had no insurance coverage for dental care**.
- ~ As a result, approximately **11% indicate they use the hospital emergency room for dental pain**.

“We are not just giving back smiles; we are giving hope to people.”

The Oral Health Committee concluded that a comprehensive, deliberate, and multifaceted approach would be required to achieve sustainable, long-term improvements in the community’s adult oral health. The approach will necessitate a collaboration among many community partners and the engagement of a volunteer dental workforce.



Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council is a local nonprofit fostering collaboration with providers, government, nonprofits, businesses and individuals to improve access and utilization

In January 2021, the Committee made its recommendations to the Planning Council Board of Directors that include:

- 1) Increase access to adult oral healthcare and eliminate disparities through:
 - a. **Annual free public adult dental service event** with referrals to local Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) for patients to receive follow-up care and establish a permanent dental home.
 - b. **Network of local dental providers** willing to provide general dental services to screened and referred patients pro bono in their own offices.
- 2) Prevent disease and promote oral health through education at community events and a “brand” marketing campaign.
- 3) Improve oral health literacy and self-care at the grassroots community level by empowering youth to become “first generation change makers” in their families.

Through the Oral Health Campaign, using the words of the Ben Massell Dental Clinic in Atlanta, “We are not just giving back smiles; we are giving hope to people.” As Lynn Mack discovered after receiving services from Dr. Eric Gladden, a smile can open doors to overall health, employment and self-sufficiency. Join us in changing lives and making a difference. Together, we are reimagining adult oral health in greater Savannah.

Contacts

- To volunteer at the first annual event August 27-29, 2021 contact Dr. Randall Ford rf08112@georgiasouthern.edu
- To learn more about the implementation process for the Oral Health Campaign recommendations contact Reginald Lee reginaldlee@chlink.org
- To join the volunteer Dental Referral Network contact Reginald Lee reginaldlee@chlink.org

¹ Kabore HJ, Smith C, Bernal J, Parker D, Coukas S., Chappelle-McGruder T, “The Burden of Oral Health in Georgia.” Georgia Department of Public Health, Maternal and Child Health, Office of MCH Epidemiology, Georgia Oral Health Program, May 2014.

² Georgia Older Adult Basic Screening Survey, December 2013. Oral Health Unit, Office of Family Planning and Community Health, Office of Epidemiology, Maternal and Child Health Section, Georgia Department of Public Health.