IHS Community Dental Health Coordinator Fact Sheet

What is a Community Dental Health Coordinator (CDHC)?

CDHC is a workforce model designed to improve access to dental services, much like other innovative workforce models employed by the Indian Health Service such as Expanded Function Dental Assistants (EFDAs), Community/Public Health Dental Hygienists, and Dental Health Aide Therapists (DHATs). This model was created by the American Dental Association (ADA) in 2006 "to break down the barriers that prevent people from receiving regular dental care and enjoying optimal oral health," focusing on "community-based prevention, care coordination and patient navigation to link people with dental health resources." *(American Dental Association)*

CDHCs work under the supervision of a licensed dentist in compliance with the laws in their respective states. They promote health by providing education, leadership, as well as preventative services to support underserved communities. They are typically members of the community where they serve and are trained to integrate information about oral health and overall health into the community's own language, culture and value system, thus reducing many of the barriers to health services.



Four of the first six IHS CDHCs, at the 2023 IHS Dental Updates Conference: Julia Skunkcap and Dora Wolftail (Blackfeet); Rebecca Niedo (Lawton); and Jolene Knuckles (Karuk).

What's in it for me? What do I get out of becoming a CDHC?

First, this is free training that has an estimated value of $15,000 or more. Over a dozen colleges and universities offer this training now, but through a special agreement between the IHS Division of Oral Health and the ADA, we are able to offer this training at no cost to you or your program.

Second, once you complete this training, you will be adding to your skill set and stand out among your peers. You'll be recognized nationally and most importantly, you will help improve access to dental care, oral health literacy, and preventive care for the communities you serve.

How long does the training take?

The training is an 8-10 month curriculum that is, with the exception of a final community project, accomplished online. The curriculum consists of reading materials, homework assignments, and tests along the way, as well as a final internship project. It is self-paced and we provide general guidance on how students should progress.

How could my dental program benefit from me becoming a CDHC?

The goal of a CDHC in an IHS, tribal, or urban program is to increase access to dental services, especially preventive services, to those American Indian/Alaska Native patients that may "fall between the cracks" (miss appointments, forget to follow up on treatment, etc.).

In our first class, our six students all gained knowledge that will help them become leaders in their communities. Here is what they said about the CDHC experience:

- Jolene Knuckles, Karuk Tribe, California: "I think that I did make a meaningful impact on the students I was able to reach and I have the confidence to continue to try and help my community."
- Rebecca Niedo, Lawton, Oklahoma: "We all want the same thing, to help our community become healthier and happy with themselves. Teaching our people the tools they need to succeed can lead to generational wealth."
- Brittney Garcia, Shingle Springs, California: "I absolutely loved taking the community Dental Health Coordinator course, as it provided me with valuable knowledge. Learning how to be a CDHC was incredibly rewarding experience that equipped me with the necessary skills to effectively coordinate and promote oral health initiatives within my community. "
- Summer Oldman, Wind River, Wyoming: "Overall I recommend the CDHC program for dental assistants who enjoy working out in the community. Working strictly in the dental clinic can sometimes be a little monotonous so it's definitely refreshing to provide awareness and prevention out in the community when I had the chance."
- Dora Wolftail, Blackfeet, Montana: "I am more knowledgeable in the aspect of what a Community Dental Health Coordinator is and what I am able to provide for our community. It's not as hard as it seems in the beginning. Make time for yourself and don't overthink!"
- Julia Skunkcap, Blackfeet, Montana: "The learning process over the 9-month span was challenging at times but also rewarding. Motivational interviewing was an eye opener for me, learning more in-depth about the oral cavity, even down to the aspects of cultural humility."

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Do CDHCs replace EFDAs, DHATs, dental assistants, or other dental staff?

No, a CDHC is an additional workforce model designed to complement what your dental program already has. In this fifth class we're continuing to train both dental assistants and dental hygienists as we believe this makes both an even stronger asset to the IHS, tribal, or urban dental program. *(Photo courtesy of the American Dental Association)*



How much does the training cost?

The training is FREE. In fact, your program will receive $10,000 in support of you participating in the program, half of which will be transferred once the dental assistant/hygienist has been accepted into the training program and completed the first four modules and the other half once the training has been completed. This is to offset any time that the student may need to complete course work during your work hours (though you can also complete work on your own time as well).

How many hours per month are required for this CDHC training program?



The amount of time each dental assistant will need to spend to complete the training program is dependent on each dental assistant or dental hygienist. Some will move through the material very quickly, while others may take longer. Some may need to complete the course work during working hours, while some may be able to do the work during lunch and other breaks, while still others may choose to do the work on their own time at home. *(Photo courtesy of the ADA)*

It is important for the dental assistant/hygienist and their supervisor to have a conversation up front about when the dental assistant/hygienist will complete the course work.

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What is the training?

The IHS CDHC training curriculum consists of nine (9) online modules that you'll be able to access easily and on your own time.

- Module 1: Advocacy and Outreach – 8 lessons
- Module 2: Communication and Cultural Competency – 4 lessons
- Module 3: Interviewing Skills – 5 lessons
- Module 4: Legal and Ethical Issues – 5 lessons
- Module 5: Introduction to Dentistry – 34 lessons (but since you are already working in an IHS or tribal program, you will be able to go through these very quickly)
- Module 6: Screening and Classification – 12 lessons
- Module 7: Prevention of Dental Caries – 11 lessons (but you should be able to go through these very quickly as well)
- Module 8: Prevention of Oral Cancer – 6 lessons
- Module 9: Training at a Community Health Clinic – "internship" (this is basically an opportunity for your dental director or dentist preceptor to evaluate your dental assistant/ hygienist and CDHC skills, complementing the dental assistant competency assessments we have in place in the IHS)
- Community Project: Using your new CDHC skills, you will oversee a community dental prevention project that benefits your dental clinic and community. Examples include a health fair, a special one-day preventive event (Give Kids A Smile®), or another project to increase access to dental services or preventive dental services at your clinic. You will use the IHS oral health promotion/disease prevention program planning format in designing, executing, and reporting on your final project:



  - P – problem statement
  - O – objectives: 2-3 "SMART" objectives – specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based
  - A – activities (that address objectives)
  - R – resources (personnel, budgetary, etc.)
  - E – evaluation (of objectives, lessons learned, etc.)

We will share all of the projects from the previous classes with you to give you ideas!

Does someone help us or are we completely on our own?

We have a coach that will be assigned to each student who will be there to answer questions and help you along the way. Students will also turn in their journal entries, homework assignments, and tests to their respective coach.

We will have monthly meetings where the coaches and program coordinator will be able to provide support, answer questions from the students, discuss next steps, and more.

Ready to get started?

If you're ready to apply, please complete the accompanying application and submit it by 12:00 P.M. (noon) Eastern Time on Thursday, November 19, 2026!

We will notify applicants and their supervisors of selection by mid-December 2026, and we'll have our first meeting in early January 2027. We anticipate accepting five dental assistants and/or dental hygienists in this CDHC class.

