

Press Release

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Major Improvements in Oral Health Revealed and Hero Awards Presented at Oral Health Summit 2021

Santa Cruz County – Yesterday, February 4th, the Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County Steering Committee (OHA) hosted the Oral Health Summit 2021. At this virtual event, the 2021 Oral Health Report Card was revealed and four local Oral Health Heroes were recognized for their outstanding commitment to improving oral health for the underserved in Santa Cruz County. Over sixty people were in attendance, including many county, city, non-profit organization and dental community leaders.

The Summit opened with the [2021 Oral Health Report Card](#), which showed remarkable improvements from 2014 to 2018 across all three goals of the OHA Strategic Plan: promoting visits for children by their first tooth or first birthday; encouraging kindergarten students to visit the dentist during their kindergarten year; expanding prevention, treatment, and clinical capacity. Considerable community effort, interagency collaboration, and funding came together to produce the advancement in all three of the strategic goals.

Next, Santa Cruz County Supervisor, Zach Friend, presented the Oral Health Hero Awards to four local Santa Cruz advocates of oral health.

A Lifetime Achievement Award was given to Cynthia Matthews for her decades of oral health promotion as past Mayor, Santa Cruz City Council member, and current member of the Oral Health Access Steering Committee during which time she has spearheaded water fluoridation efforts and advocacy, led the charge for increased investments to community programs including more access to dental services, and has supported a new dental clinic project in the City of Santa Cruz. Her dedication to improving health, including oral health, has touched tens of thousands of lives across Santa Cruz County.

The Oral Health Hero Team Award for a team of outstanding non-dental professionals was given to David Brody, Executive Director, and Alicia Fernandez, Health Outreach and Enrollment Supervisor, from First 5 Santa Cruz County, for their steadfast and synergistic collaboration to promote and disseminate oral health education to families of young children, therefore aiding in the prevention of childhood caries.

The Oral Health Hero Award for Outstanding Dental Professional was given to Noel Kelsch, Cabrillo College Dental Hygiene Program Director, for her passionate promotion of oral health care both locally and globally, for

her advocacy of oral health care for vulnerable populations, and for her commitment to the education and training of future dental professionals.

“We are so fortunate to have oral health champions in our county. Through their commitment the percentage of children seeing a dentist by their first tooth or first birthday increased from 14% in 2014 to 52% in 2018” said Dr. Sepideh Taghvaei, Chief Dental Officer of Dientes Community Dental Care.

To see the 2021 Oral Health Report Card and listen to a recording of the Oral Health Summit Visit <http://oralhealthscc.org/>.

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Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County’s mission is to improve the oral health of Santa Cruz County by uniting stakeholders and advocating sound, measurable strategies that increase access to care and education. The Steering Committee represents a wide array of local health industry experts, community leaders and education advocates.