

# ORAL HEALTH IN NORTH OMAHA

*Oral Health Needs at Heart Ministry Center's Monen Healthcare Clinic*



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Made possible by Carequest Institute for Oral Health  
In partnership with Nebraska Appleseed and 1st Sky Omaha

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Hear powerful stories from community members  
facing health challenges due to a lack of affordable dental care.

## INTRODUCTION

At Heart Ministry Center, our guiding motto is “Dignity for All.” For us, this means everyone we serve deserves a vital role in a healthy, thriving community. Nothing is more closely tied to a person’s dignity than their oral health. Your smile can make or break your first impression, and a problem with your teeth can lead to bigger health problems.

Through the support of the Carequest Institute for Oral Health, Heart Ministry Center, in collaboration with Nebraska Appleseed and 1st Sky Omaha, we interviewed dental patients of Heart Ministry’s Monen Healthcare Clinic. Information gathered from these interviews was used to create Heart Ministry Center’s oral health policy agenda, which is included at the end of this report. A short film was also produced and can be viewed below. *Quotes from these interviews are highlighted in red.*

- 83 video interviews completed
- Filmed from September through November 2024
- Interviewees spoke English, Russian, French, Chinese, and Spanish
- Short film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=621Y5cAyTEk>

## WHAT WE LEARNED

**Systemic influences** - There are systemic barriers and solutions to oral health, and the solutions we need go beyond brushing, flossing, and visiting the dentist.

**Community responsibility** - We all have a responsibility to promote oral health. If we do, our entire society will benefit.

**Disparities** - Access to oral health is about much more than willpower and individual choice. It is about access to systemic factors that influence oral health outcomes.

### **Our 83 interviewees told us:**

- The cost of dental care is too high
- Oral health problems impact physical health and mental health
- Emergency rooms are used for oral health problems, but the problem is not resolved
- Many factors influence oral health outcomes, including income, housing, and experience with the criminal justice system

## PROCEDURE

The interviews were completed using Heart Ministry Center’s trauma-informed interviewing process, which includes:

- Personal invitations to participate in the interviews. Marketing materials were not used to recruit participants.
- Conversations with participants about the purpose of the project.
- Options for participation include interviews without video and submitting written comments.
- Interviewers who are also staff members of the Heart Ministry Center and are trained in compassionate communication.
- Interviewers identify needs expressed during the interviews and offer real-time resources at the Heart Ministry Center or with other community partners.
- Each interviewee receives a \$50 gift card to compensate them for their time and the information they share.
- Each interviewee has the opportunity to complete a survey about their experience.

## RESULTS

REPORTED EXPERIENCE	% REPORTING
Experienced oral pain	100%
Cost prevented access to care	100%
Utilized Emergency Room	30%
Physical health impacted	43%
Mental health impacted	21%

**Presenting problem:** all of the individuals interviewed had a concern with their oral health that led them to seek dental services from Heart Ministry Center’s Monen Healthcare Clinic. All who were interviewed shared that they had experienced pain associated with their oral health problems.

***“I’ve had a lot of trouble with my teeth. A lot of cavities, a lot of chipped teeth.” - Jay***

- 21 (30%) lost teeth or teeth pulled
- 15 (21%) cracked or broken teeth
- 16 (23%) cavities
- 13 (18%) infection
- 6 (8%) trouble with wisdom teeth
- Other concerns reported included gum disease, holes in teeth, problems related to root canals, hereditary issues, and addiction-related problems.

**Cost:** The cost of oral healthcare presented an issue for all the individuals we interviewed. Most, if not all, had no dental insurance at the time of the interview.

***“I have many problems. It hurts a lot and there are times when it gets swollen and I can’t go to work.” - Marta***

Common themes included:

- **The cost was too high** - Interviewees had tried to receive care through other dentists in the community, but the cost was too high.
- **Sliding scales unaffordable** - Interviewees had attempted to receive care through dental offices with sliding fee scales, but the cost was still too high.
- **Lack of insurance** - Interviewees reported having dental insurance in the past, but they no longer had this insurance.

**Health Impact:** 31 (43%) said that their oral health problem impacted their overall health, with difficulties including:

- 15 (21%) trouble eating
- 5 (7%) Headache
- 4 (6%) trouble sleeping
- Other impacts reported included infection, weight gain, weight loss, nausea, and slurred speech.

***“I am a type two diabetic...so I have to actually really pay attention to...my mouth care because...I can get infections real easy.” - Marcus***

**Mental Health Impact:** 15 (21%) said that their oral health problem impacted their mental health. They reported embarrassment, avoiding smiling, impact on their self-esteem,

depression, and stress. Many noted that this affected their ability to work and/or their confidence related to work.

**Emergency Room Use:** 22 (30%) reported accessing the emergency room in an attempt to receive treatment for their oral health problem. All of these interviewees reported that they had accessed the emergency room, but their oral health problem was not resolved there. **At the Monen Healthcare Clinic, 45% of our patients report that they would have gone to the emergency room were it not for our clinic.**

***“At the stage where it was almost septic I had to [go to the ER], because it affected my hearing and my head so I couldn’t see out of my right eye so they had to issue antibiotics and a steroid to keep my lungs open.” - Elizabeth***

**Conditions for good health:** Interviewees were asked about other factors that influence their health, including financial resources, access to food, and housing. The amount we earn, what we eat, and where we live all affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes and risks. The graph below illustrates data from our Monen Healthcare Clinic patient satisfaction survey, where we ask patients if they are making enough money, have enough food, and if they have adequate housing (1,180 patients):

RATING	MONEY	FOOD	HOUSING
Excellent	34%	45%	58%
Good	26%	37%	31%
Poor	40%	17%	11%

## CONCLUSION

### **Dignity through health**

Good health care is a vital part of a healthy, thriving society. Our families, communities, and economy are all stronger when people can get the medical attention they need when they need it, regardless of their income or circumstances. A lack of access to care, on the other hand, has a negative ripple effect throughout society. When people can't see a dentist regularly, it can result in higher levels of health problems that could have been prevented. When people delay seeking care due to costs, problems often become more difficult and expensive to treat. In the meantime, our neighbors, coworkers, and loved ones aren't as healthy as they could be, and our health care system isn't fulfilling its potential.

Using our nation's resources wisely means making smart decisions now to avoid problems later. By making sure that our community has strong prevention efforts in place and access to oral health care, we can reduce costs by stopping problems before they start.

Everyone we interviewed had significant barriers to accessing dental care. The cost of the care was a barrier for 100% of the individuals we interviewed. Additionally, we know that 45% of Monen Healthcare Clinic patients would utilize local emergency rooms, were it not for our clinic. Given this information, access to preventative oral health care will be a priority area of focus for Heart Ministry Center moving forward. Policy priorities may include:

- Increase access to affordable health coverage.
- Ensure that our community members have the necessary information to access health coverage.

### **Dignity through quality of life**

Our income and financial stability significantly impact our health. When people have higher, more stable incomes, they can afford to spend money on things that improve their health, such as better dental care or healthier food options. On the other hand, when people are unable to meet their household expenses, they are more likely to forgo necessary dental care, which can result in more serious and expensive problems to treat.

Everyone we interviewed struggled to meet their basic expenses and lacked sufficient funds to cover dental care. Therefore, the income of our community members will be another area of focus for Heart Ministry Center moving forward. Policy priorities may include:

- Reduce hunger and increase access to nutritious foods.
- Promote quality jobs, liveable wages, and access to adult education and skills training.
- Defend the legal rights of low-income community members.
- Support economic and social progress for community members impacted by the criminal justice system.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Get involved with the Heart Ministry Center and help us improve health outcomes throughout the community.

- **Donate:** Support our essential healthcare services with a [financial contribution](#).
- **Volunteer:** Sign up on our [website](#) to lend your time.
- **Stay Connected:** Follow us on social media for updates, stories, and ways to make a positive impact.

Hear powerful stories from community members facing health challenges due to a lack of affordable dental care.

Scan the QR code below to watch their testimonials and see the real impact of cost barriers on oral and overall health.

Learn how support for dental services can transform lives, improving both dental and general health for those most in need.

