A Racial Equity-Focused Communication Strategy: A Case Study on Dental Therapy

Fifteen years ago, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) launched a campaign to change how dental care is delivered in America at the request of Tribal leaders. What started as a grassroots initiative to expand dental care to Alaska Natives has grown into a state and Tribal-led movement to build a culturally and racially representative workforce by authorizing dental therapists to deliver care in their local communities. The movement successfully elevated oral health as a racial justice issue and the policy results have far-reaching positive economic and health impacts.

PROBLEM

More than 60 million people live in dental shortage areas in the United States. Tooth decay is the number one chronic childhood illness, more prevalent than asthma and a leading contributor to medical debt among U.S. households. It disproportionately affects poor children and children of color. When people can't get dental care they live in pain, miss school and work and, in severe cases, suffer infections leading to hospitalizations or death.

It has been more than two decades since U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher called tooth decay a silent epidemic. While care for some has improved, access for many has worsened, widening health disparities.

GOALS

The early goals were simple: increase the number of children and families who get regular dental care and close the gap between those who have access to dental care and those who do not through the introduction of the dental therapist as a profession.

We equipped five coalitions with the tools they needed to build public support and foster political will that addressed racialized structures embedded in policies, which led to new state practice laws authorizing dental therapists to work as members of dental-led teams. This was not a short-term effort, so it was important that coalitions, Tribal organizations and all community members had a shared understanding of the root causes, and the tools and resources to advocate for dental therapy as a racial equity issue.

APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION CAPACITY BUILDING

This decade-long initiative to create more equitable oral health outcomes for children and families brought together communication and policy firms, grantees and champion advocate organizations, health care and educational institutions, and dental professionals to change the way dental care is provided to all communities. As part of our strategic communication, WKKF provided technical assistance to equip community partners with tools to advance racial equity and change practices and policies. We also provided cover—as an influencer—for partners when their work, organizations and funding were threatened by our opposition, the American Dental Association.

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Community Catalyst

Two firms: Burness and Kauffman & Associates became the communication partners to co-create this equity-driven campaign. While Burness focused on the states, and Kauffman focused on the Tribes, there was intentional learning journey on racial healing and racial equity across the firms and across all the coalitions and Tribes. Community Catalyst, a national movement-building organization, provided wrap-around support for advocacy groups. They worked hand-in-hand with the communication firms to guide the development and delivery of communication strategies across each coalition.

The foundation held bi-annual networking meetings with grantees and stakeholders of this initiative, as coalitions expanded their base and brought in new leaders. The first day of each convening was grounded in the racial histories and stories of the communities where these meetings were held. These "racial healing" conversations and dialogues happened BEFORE any conversations could happen about communication strategies and tactics, advocacy efforts, policies or systems change. They simply brought people together to understand each other's truths and experiences. This happened in each state coalition. For example in Cincinnati it was the experience of the Underground Railroad Freedom Center; in Kansas, Brown v. Board and Haskell Indian Boarding School, etc.

Communication capacity building was consistently delivered in the context of the meeting. It followed the coalition's ongoing work to build understanding of racial healing and racial equity to ultimately unpacking coded and racially-loaded language along with the systems and policies that contribute to the oral health inequities. It was delivered in the form of messaging, storytelling, social media, media training and policy outreach which were very hands-on and interactive.

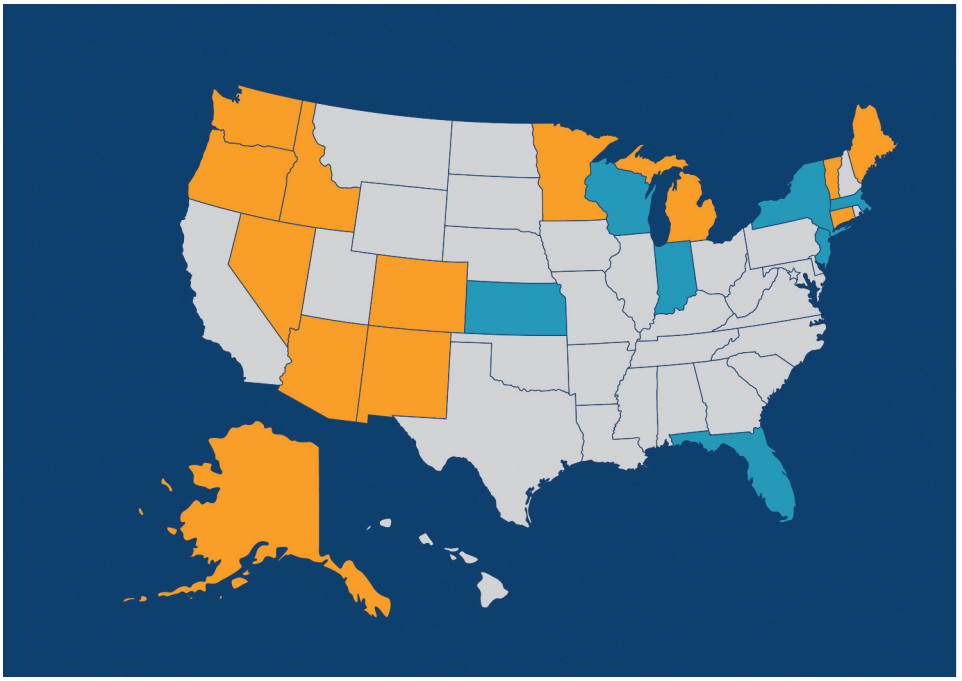
IMPACT

The plan was iterative and sustained, delivering a multi-level communication campaign to educate and sometimes equip an array of target audiences—e.g., state policymakers, Tribal and community leaders, dentists and grassroots advocacy organizations, educational institutions—to change how dental care is delivered. What it became was a movement to advance community-centered, racially just policies for the health care workforce.

In 2009, most people didn't know what a dental therapist was and non-dental providers were not included in conversations about access to dental care. Through focus group testing, we learned how most people had an easier time supporting dental therapists when compared to how nurse practitioners and physician assistants extend the reach of doctors. This simple association was included as a standard talking point and now is the go-to example used by Tribal leaders, policymakers, dentists, media, dental therapists and public health leaders who speak on this topic.

Deploying an innovative communication strategy that centered community and was informed by data and research – over many years – helped ignite the movement. As of June 2023, 20 states have authorized dental therapists to practice in some capacity, and more than a dozen more are pursuing change.

Additionally, a workforce providing education, prevention and dental care now better reflects the community, and is significantly changing the trajectory of health outcomes for the children and families athey serve.



National Partnership *for* Dental Therapy