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CHI St. Gabriel's Health and Apple Tree Dental collaborate to improve oral health access

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By [Morrison County Record](#)



State Rep. Erin Murphy visited CHI St. Gabriel's Health and Apple Tree Dental. Murphy, who sits on the state Health and Human Services Reform committee, was interested in seeing Apple Tree Dental's new location on campus and learn about efforts to integrate oral health into primary care. Pictured are (from left): Dr. Katie Johnson, DDS, Murphy and Connie Karjalahti, RDH, DT (dental therapist).



Research shows there is a strong link between oral health and overall health. But for many families in Morrison County, the barriers for accessing oral health care are great. To address this issue, Family Medical Center, an entity of CHI St. Gabriel's Health, has teamed up with Apple Tree Dental to improve oral health access and preventative care for community members.

In January, CHI St. Gabriel's Health, in partnership with Apple Tree Dental, was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the Minnesota Department of Health.

"The vision for this project is focused on integrating oral health care with medical care," said Dr. Michael Helgeson, DDS, chief executive officer of Apple Tree Dental. "This is the direction health care is going. We're putting the mouth back in the body."

Family Medical Center and Apple Tree Dental staff decided to apply for the grant because of both a great need and an even greater opportunity to improve access to oral health care. According to the 2016 County Health Rankings, Morrison County has a high population to dentist ratio at 3,280 people per dentist, which is over twice as high as state and national ratios.

"Access to dental providers is an issue in Morrison County," Family Medical Center Administrator Rhonda Buckallew said. "This is especially true for low-income residents. Patients have been traveling long distances for dental care."

Apple Tree Dental staff also saw this need.

"We really became aware of the issue when we started seeing patients from Morrison County showing up at our Coon Rapids location," said Karen Engstrom, chief operating officer of Apple Tree Dental. "We knew we had to do something."

"We saw an opportunity for action. There was great interest, a willingness to collaborate and space available allowing us to locate on the St. Gabriel's Hospital campus," Helgeson said.

The grant initiative includes a pilot project offering dental varnishing within Family Medical Center during well-child visits, increasing oral health education and screening, coordinating the flow of oral health and medical health information between Family Medical Center and Apple Tree Dental and making referrals for patients with chronic health conditions.

Apple Tree Dental has also increased the number of days and hours of the Little Falls operation. The clinic is located on the third floor of the Unity Specialty Center at CHI St. Gabriel's Health, making a dental appointment convenient for Family Medical Center patients. The clinic is open Thursdays and Fridays and is staffed by dentists, a dental therapist, a dental hygienist, dental assistants and a care coordinator.

The partnership between Family Medical Center and Apple Tree Dental is a natural fit, administrators said.

"Our model of care is focused on caring for the needs of a whole person rather than care focused on a specific condition," Buckallew said. "Addressing oral health issues aligns with our patient-centered, 'whole person' approach to care."

Helgeson agrees the partnership makes sense.

"We have long been known as a community collaborative practice," Helgeson said. "Partnering with Family Medical Center to bring together the best care for patients has been a logical extension of this for us."

The outlook looks positive.

"We are optimistic about this project and are grateful for the relationships we have established with CHI St. Gabriel's Health and our other community partners, including South County Health Alliance, Morrison County Public Health and now the Minnesota Department of Health," Helgeson said.

"The integration of oral health care with medical care will benefit the community," Buckallew said. "The overall result will be better health outcomes for our patients."

For more information about the project, contact Buckallew at (320) 631-7200 or Apple Tree Dental at (032) 631-5653.

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