

<https://www.essentiahealth.org/about/essentia-health-newsroom/essentia-values-rural-access-to-health-care-just-kids-dental#javascript;>

## Essentia Health VALUES rural access to health care: Just Kids Dental

May 07, 2024 By: Caitlin Pallai



Ashley and David Wallin of Cloquet started with Just Kids Dental (JKD) in 2019, when their daughters, June and Grace, were both in Head Start.

Founded in 2006, JKD is a 501c3 nonprofit charitable organization based in Two Harbors, Minnesota. JKD's mission is to increase rural access to preventive dental services for low-income uninsured and underinsured children through the delivery of portable, school- and community-based dental care and education at no charge.

JKD also helps connect children with local dentists to establish a dental home. JKD serves 31 rural elementary, middle and high schools across 10 districts in Lake, St. Louis, Carlton and Douglas counties.

Ashley recalls learning about JKD through her daughters' Head Start program. "At the time, our daughters were on medical assistance (Medicaid) through the state," she explains. "To find a dentist with openings and who would accept medical assistance was difficult.

Deer River was one of the closest spots and that's a 150-mile round trip." According to the American Dental Association, in 2022 the Medicaid reimbursement for child dental care services in Minnesota was 35.8% of dentist charges.

As a result, many dentists are reluctant to treat Medicaid patients. "Four of the schools we serve are in Lake County, an area where dentists do not accept new patients enrolled in Minnesota

Medicaid,” explains Laura Borud, executive director at JKD. “Families in Lake County travel up to 200 miles round trip to see a dentist.

Another 16 schools are in Carlton County, which is designated a Dental Health Professional Shortage Area by the Health Resources and Services Administration.

”By participating in JKD, Ashley and David don’t have to take time off work and their daughters remain in school.

## **The cost of dental disease**

Dental problems are one of the leading causes of kids missing school; it’s estimated that 51 million school hours are lost annually due to dental-related illnesses.

“School-based dental care removes cost, time and transportation barriers so children can easily access needed preventive dental services to stay healthy,” says Borud. “In our first year, we provided services to 156 children.

In 2024, it’s over 4,000.”The JKD team includes a board of directors, a collaborative practice dentist and dental hygienists and over 100 volunteers. JKD offers two programs – a school-based sealant program and school and community oral health presentations.

The school-based sealant program involves registered dental hygienists visiting each school to provide on-site preventive care using portable dental equipment.

Services include oral health screenings, dental cleanings and sealants, fluoride varnish applications, proper brushing and flossing instruction, oral health and nutrition education, complimentary toothbrush kits, referral assistance and case management.

JKD provides over 100 presentations a year that teach the importance of proper daily brushing and flossing and good nutrition. “Both girls learn about oral hygiene and have a cleaning twice a year,” Ashley says of June and Grace. “Neither has needed a cavity filled yet, thankfully.

They’ve been good brushers so far! “Just Kids Dental helps redress economic, access and health care disparities in the Northland,” explains Dr. John Conry, DDS, a collaborative practice pediatric dentist and JKD board member.

“A high percentage of children in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin are growing up in poverty. This means they are less likely to have a dental home, are more likely to have a poor diet and are thus at greater risk of dental disease at an early age.”

There is a significant relationship between dental and systemic disease, including chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Preventive services play a critical role in reducing the impact of dental disease. “Since 2006, we provided a value of \$13.2 million in preventive dental care,” explains Borud. “According to the CDC, for

every \$1 invested in preventive dental care, \$38 is saved in future restorative and emergency care.

Just Kids Dental has saved local taxpayers \$501.6 million in restorative and emergency care of Medicaid-enrolled children. “And since day one, we haven’t charged for our services. This is made possible by strong partners like Essentia Health.”

## **Essentia's support**

Essentia Health has a more than 20-year history of investing in communities across our service area through community contributions.

Essentia prioritizes contributions to non-profit organizations working to address social determinants of health in key priority areas like access to right-time, right-place health care.

“Essentia’s longstanding partnership with Just Kids Dental aligns with our commitment to make a healthy difference in people’s lives,” says Kala Pedersen, community relations program manager. “Access to dental care for youth is important not only for their immediate health and well-being but is also laying the groundwork for healthier generations to come. We are so grateful to support Just Kids Dental’s mission.”

Since 2011, Essentia has contributed \$489,415 to JKD. “The level of funding Essentia provides in relation to our organization size and

budget, it's invaluable," emphasizes Laura, adding that Essentia is one of JKD's "oral health champions." "Essentia also provides vital volunteer hours and in-kind services," she adds. "Our success is dependent on local community support, and Essentia is always at the front of the line asking how they can help." "Just Kids Dental is a valuable part of the social safety net in this community," says Dr. Conry. "The fact that Essentia identified and recognized the importance of a program like this says a lot about Essentia's values."

Now in elementary school, June and Grace continue to see JKD. "Just Kids Dental has been a really great opportunity," says Ashley. "Especially in those early years, it was nice to know our daughters could have consistent care, and from someone we trusted. "My daughters love it, especially my youngest. When she gets that new toothbrush kit, she's all about it. "Ashley says she often recommends JKD to newer moms. "If they're struggling, or they're trying to find a place nearby, I tell them it's a great opportunity and my kids love it," she says. "Some families might not think they're eligible, but I say it's worth a try." To learn more about Just Kids Dental, visit [justkidsdentalinc.org](http://justkidsdentalinc.org).