

ARCORA

Foundation

Bending the Arc of Oral Health Toward Equity

Solutions Series Summary for June 18, 2025

Presenters: Merri Jones (Eastern Washington University), Kylie Kingsbury (CHAS Health)

Facilitators: Heather Wallace, Kerstin Tebbe

Host: Arcora Foundation, in collaboration with Collective Mind and community partners

Purpose of the Session

This session highlighted a research-to-practice partnership focused on addressing oral health disparities in Spokane's Marshallese community. The initiative combined academic research, community engagement, and healthcare innovation to reduce barriers and improve access to dental services.

Project Overview

The project originated from a graduate student's research at Eastern Washington University examining oral health knowledge and behaviors among Marshallese adults. The study led to a successful pilot and eventual policy change at CHAS Health, where community health workers (CHWs) serve as both interpreters and care navigators.

Key Partners:

- Eastern Washington University (EWU) Dental Hygiene Program
- CHAS Health
- Better Health Together (Smile Spokane's backbone organization)
- Marshallese community health workers (Jimmy, Betline, Esther, Ty)
- Spokane Regional Health District

How It Works

- A 34-item survey based on the Health Belief Model was developed and delivered by trusted Marshallese CHWs.
- Findings identified oral health practices, perceptions, and barriers like transportation, language, and insurance.
- CHAS used this data to pilot an interpreter-CHW hybrid role at its dental clinic.
- Following success, CHAS expanded to four Marshallese CHWs now providing in-person and remote interpreting, care navigation, and outreach.

Lessons Learned

Success Factors:

- Trusted messengers from within the community

- Cross-sector collaboration
- Research-driven decision-making
- Institutional support for innovation

Challenges:

- Coordination across systems (IRB, ethics, scheduling)
- Balancing academic timelines with real-world implementation
- Maintaining work-life boundaries for CHWs embedded in their own communities

Adaptations:

- CHW roles tailored to both medical and dental care settings
- New float/interpreter positions added for flexibility
- Ongoing training and integration of remote services

Group Sensemaking Highlights

Through GroupMap, participants identified the following as most important:

- Trusted messengers and culturally responsive care
- Collaborative, community-led implementation
- Flexibility in design and scaling
- Translation of research into sustainable system change

Next Steps

- Continued employment and training of CHWs at CHAS
Publication of the original research by the former student, now an EWU faculty member
- Integration of similar community-engaged projects into EWU's dental public health curriculum
- Invitation for others to propose and share local oral health initiatives at future Solutions Series sessions