

Foundations as Network Strategists, Weavers, and Managers

Learning From One Foundation's Journey and Results

In the context of a policy environment that is ever-evolving, the need for alignment around solutions is crucial to achieve significant systems change. Philanthropies, and health grantmakers in particular, can play an important role in mobilizing grantees and partners to leverage their collective strengths and forward social movements. Acting as network strategist, weaver, and manager, funders not only position themselves and their partners as large scale change agents, but can set themselves apart from others as they put into practice non-traditional approaches to changing the world.

The DentaQuest Foundation has employed the theories of network strategy to align and strengthen national efforts around oral health. While this approach has yielded significant achievements towards improving oral health equity in the United States, it has also produced several important learnings that others can find value in. This document presents highlights from a recent Foundation Review article describing this work. The full article can be found at www.scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol9/iss2/5.

Highlights of this approach

While a number of state and regional funders invest in oral health, the DentaQuest Foundation is one of a few national funders focused solely on this issue. As such, the DentaQuest Foundation was uniquely positioned to be the lead organization to corral and align broader, diverse efforts to improve oral health outcomes across the country. Central to the strategy for Oral Health 2020 is the idea that networks and engaged stakeholders with the skills and abilities to work with diverse groups are critical.

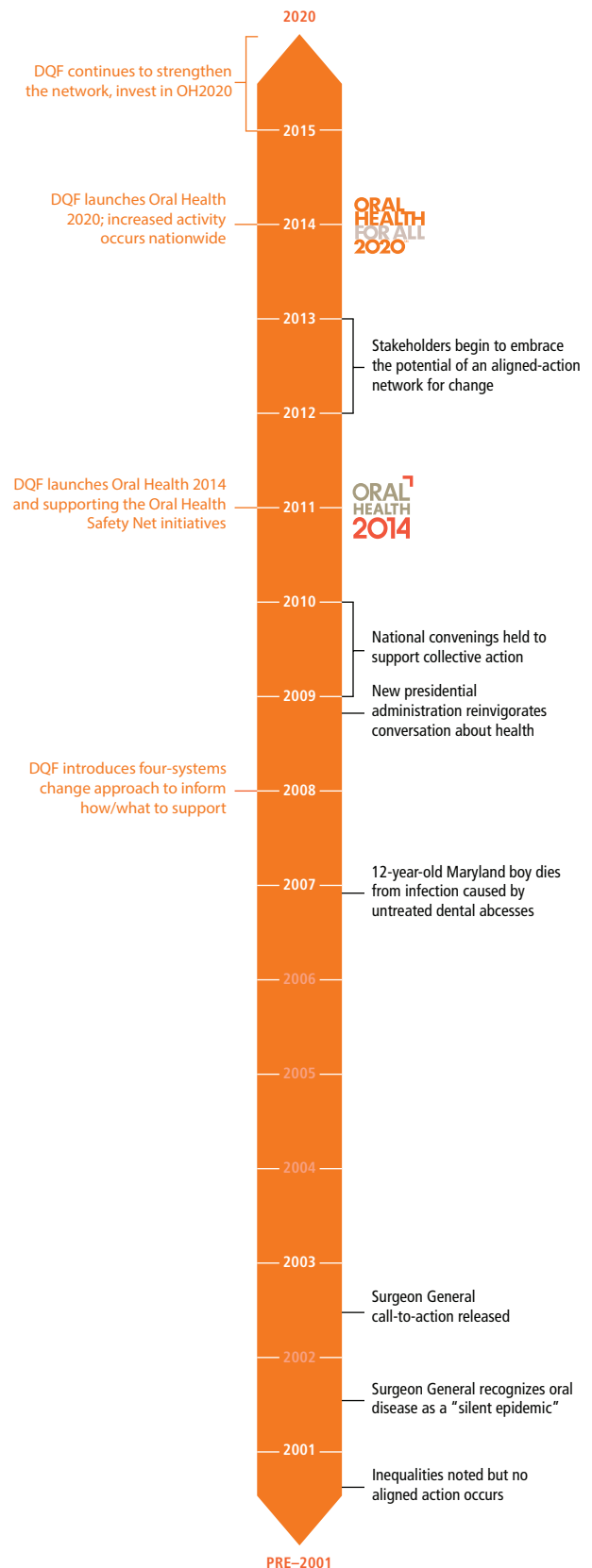
This approach focuses on four strategies:

- Focus on systems
- Development of state leadership
- Organization of a national network
- Application of a strategic learning approach

Results

Looking back on five years, the Foundation and its partners list significant accomplishments as the result of the collective impact of the Oral Health 2020 network:

- **Relationships with policymakers** – State alliances reported forging new relationships with almost 300 key influencers, which include elected officials, Medicaid agencies, state advocacy groups, health insurers and community health agencies. Of these:
 - 27% consisted of creating oral health champions
 - 30% represented active supporters of oral health



- **Systems and policy changes** – Through their involvement in the Oral Health 2020 network and the resulting connections, state advocates have gained influence as voices for oral health and have been able to catalyze attention around the issue. The network also contributed to policy changes in dental benefits, including:
 - **15 states** preserving or expanding dental benefits
 - **11 states** strengthening state-level oral health infrastructure, either with the establishment of new oral health director positions, or by filling the positions with dental professionals
 - **7 states** establishing or updating state oral health plans
 - **7 states** including oral health in the implementation of the Affordable Care Act provisions
 - **4 states** improving dental reimbursement rates
- **A robust national network** – Today, Oral Health 2020 counts more than 1,000 members in its ranks. In addition to the numbers, 89% of network members surveyed feel that members of the network are achieving more together than alone, with 94% of respondents feeling committed to continuing their participation in the network.

The Foundation’s impact on these results is further illustrated in an analysis by an evaluation firm that shows that children in states receiving DentaQuest Foundation funding show an

increase in rates of children accessing oral health services from a non-dental provider. In contrast, this rate decreased in states that did not receive funding. While it is not possible to link these changes to the efforts of grantees specifically or alone, it is a trend that is consistent with the Foundation’s support of interprofessional collaboration and the provision of oral health services by non-dental providers.

Insights

This approach puts funders in the position of driving impactful social change, in addition to supporting ongoing programmatic efforts that address short term needs. However, it would be naïve to assume that this ambitious approach is not without its challenges. The authors detail lessons learned from supporting the development and support of a national network.



“A lot of folks [working in oral health] are clinicians, health care providers, and public health professionals. They weren’t thinking of themselves as change agents and movement builders.”

– Marianne Hughes, IISC’s founding executive director

Importance of evaluation – Evaluation efforts assist foundations in assessing effectiveness and driving strategy. Evaluation had to not only assess who was participating in the network, but how that participation impacted policy and systems change, both short and long-term.

Network-building – The Foundation recognizes and continues to educate stakeholders on the process of network building and weaving as a long game, that requires a deep commitment of time, resources, and energy to realize impact that is both significant and sustainable. Because of this, the Foundation devotes 30–40% of its investments in network infrastructure support. Throughout this process, the Foundation realized the importance of:

- Clearly articulating the network’s purpose and why it matters – The Oral Health 2020 goals and targets are crucial structures and context to align and unify members, and provide a comprehensive understanding of the work to external stakeholders
- Providing support for technical assistance and capacity building, as in the areas of open thinking, collaborative planning, policy understanding, strategic communications, equity, and more

- Building and maintaining strong member-to-member connections, supported by in-person convenings and virtual engagement mechanisms
- Using a collaborative platform to encourage and manage information flow

Looking ahead – With a strategy that is as long-term focused as the network approach is, the Foundation continues to evaluate how to most effectively support the network going forward. It recognizes that continued strengthening and expansion of the network is needed to achieve even more significant improvements in the oral health of the American people. While the Foundation has served as the hub of Oral Health 2020, it is expected that the network will eventually function as an independent and sustainable entity. All of this exists within the environment of an uncertain health care landscape, the implications from which seem to change from day to day. However, given its commitment and strength, the network aptly positions oral health stakeholders to better affect change as a collective entity in these uncertain times.