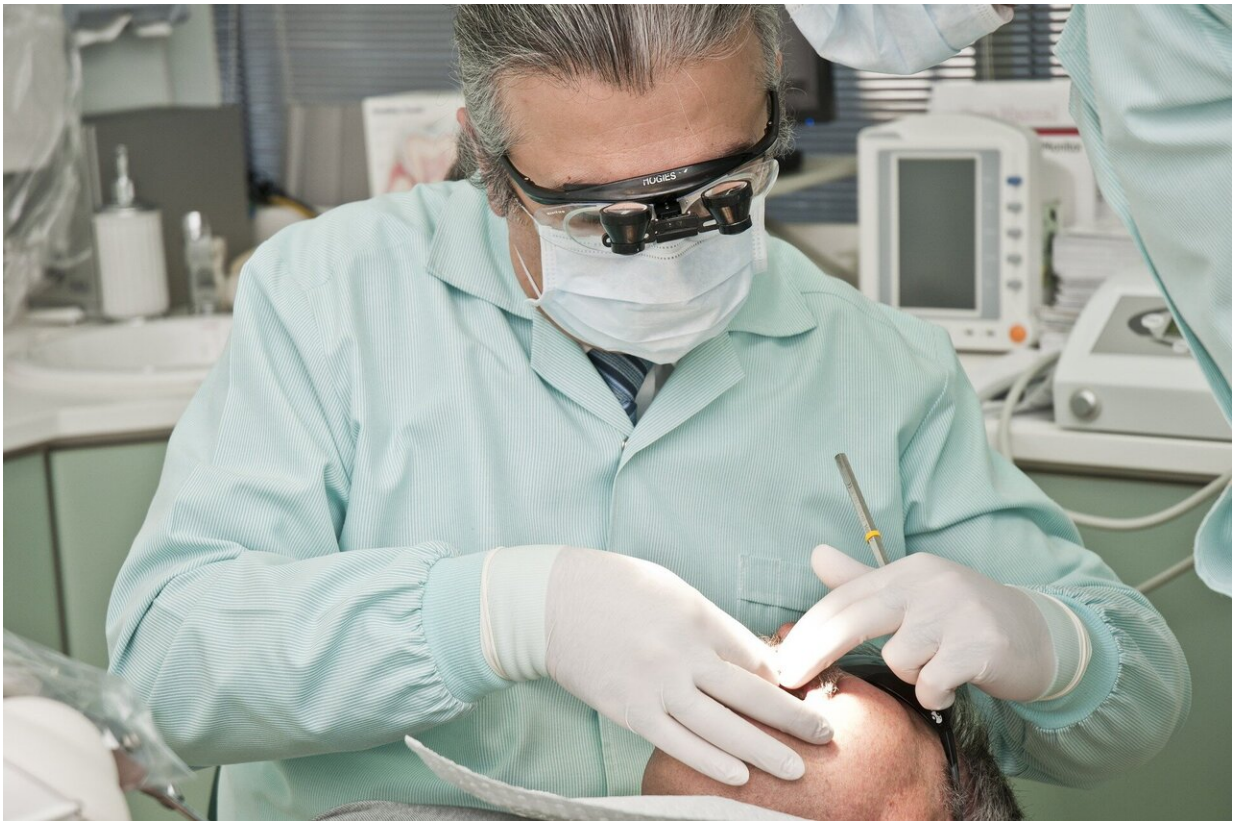


New Chicago clinic will offer free dental care to 2,500 Illinois residents a year

March 2 2022, by Lisa Schencker



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Low-income Illinois residents will soon be able to receive free dental care at a new 25,000-square-foot clinic being opened in Chicago's Fulton Market district this summer by The Aspen Group, which operates dental

and medical clinics across the country and recently moved its headquarters to Chicago.

While a number of clinics across the Chicago area offer low-cost and sometimes free [dental care](#) to vulnerable people, the new clinic will focus exclusively on dental services and be free to all patients who make no more than 200% of the federal poverty level or are on Medicaid.

"We know that oral care is essential for overall health," said Julie Frantsve-Hawley, executive director of the new TAG Oral Care Center for Excellence. "Having a healthy mouth is really essential, and a problem we see is many struggle to access dental care, and because of this they can have potentially dangerous situations that go untreated. What we hope this will do is fill this critical gap for thousands of patients in Illinois."

Among Illinois adults who had not visited a dentist in the past year, 64% cited cost as a reason, according to a 2015 survey by the American Dental Association's Health Policy Institute.

The new clinic, at 1040 W. Randolph St., will include 14 treatment rooms and another two rooms for advanced surgical procedures. The clinic is expected to serve about 2,500 patients a year.

Aspen plans to work with community groups and organizations to get the word out to patients who might benefit.

The clinic will have a full-time staff of licensed dentists and specialists as well as dental technicians and hygienists, said Dr. Sundeep Rawal, a senior vice president at Aspen. The clinic will also be a training ground for licensed dentists from Aspen Dental and ClearChoice Dental Implant practices across the country, who will go to the center to learn advanced dental technologies and procedures.

Some Chicago-area dental leaders had expressed concerns, earlier in the planning process for the clinic, about Aspen bringing in dentists from out of state for only short periods of time to treat low-income patients.

"Our concern was that there would be no accountability, and if a patient was harmed there was no continuity of care because that individual came in, worked on the patient and left, then you basically are leaving somebody in the middle of dental care without any follow-up," said Dave Marsh, director of governmental affairs for the Illinois State Dental Society.

Ultimately, the state dental society and other groups reached an agreement with Aspen that Aspen would have to have patients sign consent forms acknowledging they were being treated by out-of-state dentists, and Aspen would have to use licensed Illinois dentists to provide any follow-up care a patient might need, among other things. Gov. J.B. Pritzker signed a bill into law in August spelling out those requirements and others.

Bill sponsor Rep. Lakesia Collins, a Chicago Democrat, said the new center will help to "fill a massive need in Chicago and the state of Illinois."

The new center will join a number of organizations that offer low-cost and free dental care in the Chicago area. The Chicago Dental Society Foundation, for example, has a free dental clinic in Wheaton with three treatment rooms. And many federally qualified health centers, which are centers that receive federal funding, offer dental services alongside other medical services and may charge patients on a sliding scale, based on their abilities to pay.

UI Health's Mile Square Health Center, which is a federally qualified health center, expects to have 26 dental chairs across numerous sites by

the end of this year, said Dr. Sue Etminan, the center's dental director. Many of those sites are in neighborhoods with the greatest needs for services, she said.

"Our most successful programs at increasing access to care have been meeting patients where they're at, in their communities," she said.

The new Aspen center will be in Aspen's former headquarters in the Fulton Market district, Rawal said. That location was also chosen because it's near public transportation and has parking on-site, he said. Aspen moved to a new headquarters at 800 W. Fulton Market in October 2021.

The Aspen Group now supports more than 1,100 locations in 45 states through Aspen Dental, ClearChoice, WellNow and ChapterSM. Under Aspen's model, dentists own the practices, but the company handles administrative and training services, and the practices are branded as Aspen Dental.

The company has faced a number of legal challenges over the years.

Late last year, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey filed a lawsuit against Aspen Dental Management alleging it engaged in deceptive advertising and marketing practices, including charging patients for services it advertised as free.

In 2015, the company paid \$450,000 to settle with the New York attorney general's office after an investigation found Aspen was making business decisions that were adversely affecting patient care, including pressuring staff to increase sales of dental services and products. Aspen also reached a \$175,000 settlement with the Pennsylvania attorney general in 2010 after it was accused of using confusing or misleading information about discounts, coupons and interest-free financing. Aspen

did not admit wrongdoing as part of those settlements.

In 2020, dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants, and a dental marketing worker filed lawsuits in Cook County Circuit Court against Aspen Dental Management and the owner of an Aspen Dental clinic in Crestwood. The employees and former employees alleged they were secretly videotaped while using the clinic's bathroom. They alleged that a dental hygienist placed two hidden cameras in the bathroom and that the clinic's owners and supervisors should have known about that person's alleged criminal background before hiring him.

"While we do not comment on active litigation, several of the cases are nearly a decade old and do not reflect the positive experience that more than 30,000 patients have at the independently-owned Aspen Dental practices across the nation every day, and nor does it reflect the values of (The Aspen Group)—which continues to strive to expand access to quality, affordable care for those who need it most," The Aspen Group said in a statement.

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Citation: New Chicago clinic will offer free dental care to 2,500 Illinois residents a year (2022, March 2) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-chicago-clinic-free-dental-illinois.html>

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