WISCONSIN AHEC
Area Health Education Centers

American Dental Education Association Awards Grant to the North Central Wisconsin AHEC and Northwest WI AHEC Through the Inaugural Pathways to Smiles Program to Expand Access in the Oral Health Workforce

ADEA's Pathways to Smiles program creates an immersive training program for underserved and underrepresented high-school students

In May 2025 the American Dental Education Association announced the inaugural cohort of grantees for its Pathways to Smiles program. Generously funded by the Delta Dental Institute through the second cohort of its Future Workforce Fund, and in collaboration with the National Area Health Education Center Organization (NAO), Pathways to Smiles is a groundbreaking immersive training initiative. It is designed to expand oral health awareness and inspire the next generation of oral health professionals by engaging high school students from underserved and underrepresented communities where access to oral health education and resources may be limited. Among the grantees, the North Central Wisconsin Area Heath Education Center (AHEC) in collaboration with the Northwest WI Area Health Education Center (AHEC), received $8,000 to serve as inaugural partners to implement the Pathways to Smiles oral health curriculum.

As part of the Delta Dental Driving Greater Diversity in the Oral Health Workforce campaign, ADEA has awarded $100,000 to support AHEC sites across the country in implementing the Pathways to Smiles curriculum. Developed by a national advisory workgroup of oral health educators, K–12 teachers, health professions pathway program leaders, and AHEC professionals, the Pathways to Smiles curriculum will be implemented across 13 AHEC sites between May 1 and December 1, 2025. This initiative provides high school students with early exposure to oral health careers, including pathways to becoming a dentist, dental hygienist, dental assistant, dental laboratory technician, or an oral health faculty member or researcher. "By increasing early exposure and access to oral health career pathways for high school students ages 14–18, the Pathways to Smiles program aims to break down systemic barriers to entering the profession," said Karen P. West, D.M.D., M.P.H., President and CEO of the American Dental Education Association. "Rooted in ADEA's mission and strategic commitment to strengthening pathways into oral health careers, academia, and research, this program empowers students to see themselves as future leaders and change agents in a field where their representation is urgently needed. By reaching students at a formative stage, Pathways to Smiles helps cultivate a more representative and future-ready oral health workforce that reflects the communities it serves."

This initiative is pivotal as dental health professional shortage areas (HPSAs) continue to expand across the United States. According to the Health Resources and Services

Administration (HRSA), as of May 2025, nearly 60 million Americans reside in 7,060 designated HPSAs, with an estimated 10,145 additional oral health practitioners needed to meet current demand. By engaging youth early and within their local communities, ADEA and its AHEC grantee partners are advancing long-term workforce development strategies that foster accessibility, community engagement, and sustainability in the future of oral health.

Be on the lookout for these program offerings from our North Central and Northwestern AHEC Centers in the fall of 2025. Please visit www.ahec.wisc.edu to learn more and enroll.

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About AHECs: Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) are federally funded programs designed to enhance access to health care and improve the health of underserved populations through education and workforce development. They serve as a bridge between academic institutions and local communities, particularly in rural and underserved areas. AHECs focus on recruiting, training, and retaining health professionals by offering hands-on experiences, mentorship, and community-based learning opportunities. Their work plays a vital role in strengthening the health workforce pathway and addressing regional health disparities. For more information, visit https://www.nationalahec.org/.

About ADEA: The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) is The Voice of Dental Education. Our mission is to lead and support the health professions community in preparing future-ready oral health professionals. Our members include 80 U.S. and Canadian dental schools, more than 800 allied and advanced dental education programs, more than 55 corporations and approximately 15,000 individuals. Our activities encompass a wide range of research, advocacy, faculty development, meetings and communications, including the esteemed Journal of Dental Education®, as well as the dental school application services ADEA AADSAS®, ADEA PASS®, ADEA DHCAS® and ADEA CAAPID®. For more information, visit adea.org.

About the Delta Dental Future Workforce Fund: Delta Dental has established the first national Future Workforce Fund. This industry-leading fund makes targeted investments in comprehensive solutions, innovative pilots, and scalable models that inspire school-aged children from historically underrepresented groups to pursue a career in oral health. Visit www.deltadentalinstitute.com/fund to learn more.

About the Delta Dental Institute: The Delta Dental Institute is dedicated to advancing oral health for all Americans in partnership with Delta Dental companies and dedicated partners across the country. With expertise rooted in Delta Dental's rich history of oral health leadership, we engage in and support oral health research, community outreach, and advocacy, striving to ensure that everyone understands the importance of oral health to overall health and has access to the care they need. Visit deltadentalinstitute.com for more information about Delta Dental Plans Association.