

Creating *Bright Smiles*

Silvia, an outreach worker at a Greater Twin Cities United Way *Bright Smiles* Dental Clinic, is dedicated to providing education to parents seeking medical care for their children. When Silvia first met three-year-old Carmen, she was in desperate need of dental attention. Silvia immediately referred her to the dental director. With widespread tooth decay and several teeth needing removal or crowns, Carmen had to be seen as a hospital patient.

Tooth decay, the most common chronic childhood disease, affects 50% of first graders. It is often painful and leads to destruction of teeth, speech problems, difficulty learning, psychological problems, such as low self-esteem and 51 million hours of missed school each year. Studies show that 80% of tooth decay is found in just 25% of children, mostly from low-income families who least can afford to correct these negative effects.



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United Ways across the country are evaluating the specific health and human service needs of their communities and implementing plans to address these needs. After assessing the community, Greater Twin Cities United Way identified “children’s oral health” as an emerging issue for their community. To address this, Greater Twin Cities United Way began *Bright Smiles*. This program provides oral health education, support and dental care targeted towards new immigrant, refugee, minority and low-income households with children five and under.

Through United Way and a collaboration of community partners*, *Bright Smiles* reaches out to children and families with education, screening, and low or no cost dental care. United Way works to expand the availability of comprehensive care, improve parents’ ability to care for their children’s oral health needs and develop community awareness of oral health issues.

Without *Bright Smiles*, who knows how long Carmen would have gone without seeing a dentist. Her mother had no idea how to access dental care. If Carmen had gone much longer without treatment, none of her teeth would have been salvageable. With the education and support Carmen’s mother received from *Bright Smiles*, her two-year-old son Alex has also visited the dental clinic and will be spared the extensive restorations required by his sister. Thanks to United Way and *Bright Smiles*, both Carmen and Alex have the tools to maintain healthy teeth.

During its first year, ***Bright Smiles* educated nearly 4,000 parents/caregivers and their children on preventive dental hygiene practices**; provided 266 uninsured children with fluoride varnishes and 180 uninsured children with dental care visits. Investing in the oral health of children prevents a lifetime of costly dental procedures, chronic pain, and lost hours of school and work. Poor oral health is also linked to heart disease, yet another reason why teaching children proper dental habits is important for a lifetime of healthy living. Like United Ways nationwide, Greater Twin Cities United Way dedicates itself to helping children succeed and strengthening and supporting families throughout their community.

* John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Delta Dental Plan of Minnesota, Edwards Memorial Trust, Mardag Foundation, Deluxe Corporation, Halleland, Lewis, Nilan & Johnson, 3M-ESPE, Patterson Dental, Staples Foundation for Learning, , Target Corporation, Open Cities Health Center, West Side Community Health Services, Children’s Dental Services, Community Dental Care, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties, Suburban Ramsey Family Collaborative, White Bear Lake Area Community Counseling Center, Century College, Union Gospel Mission, and Ramsey County Child & Teen Checkups.