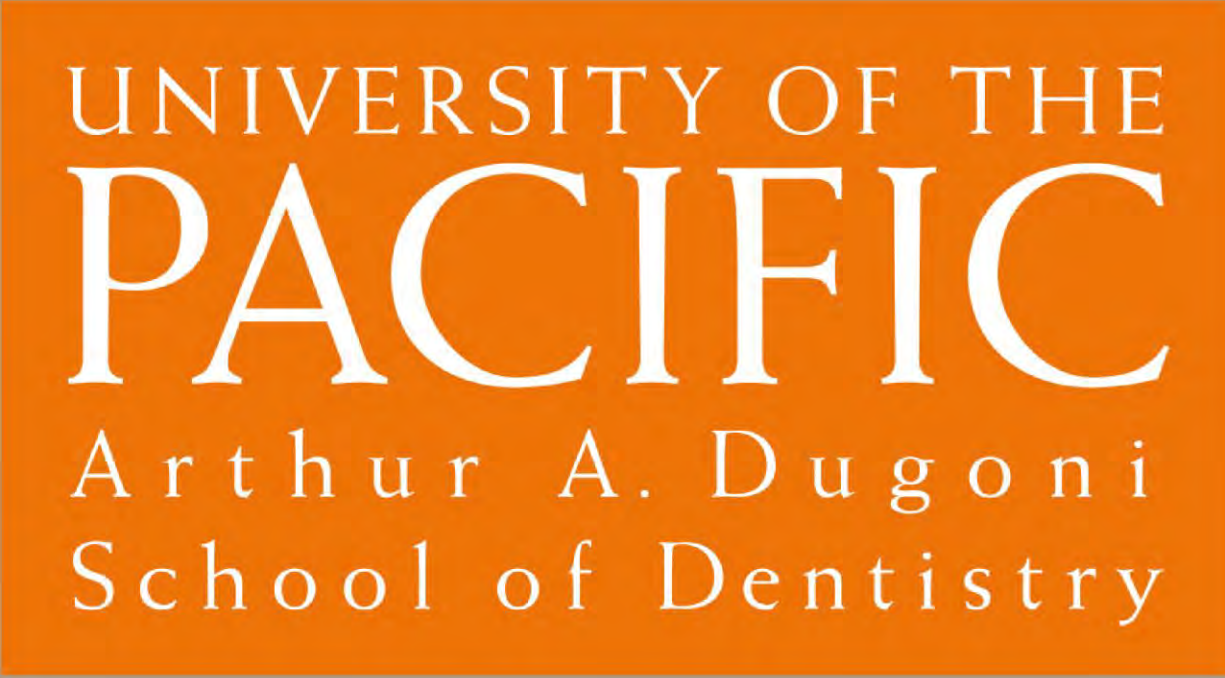


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Bridging Pathways and Advancing Access: A Pilot Project for Veterans’ Health and Wellness at Dugoni Dental School

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OBJECTIVE

Millions of U.S. Veterans lack dental insurance benefits. Unless they have a 100% service-connected disability, experienced service-related dental trauma, or were former prisoners of war, most are ineligible for comprehensive VA dental benefits—leaving them vulnerable to chronic untreated pain, functional and aesthetic limitations, and preventable oral-systemic conditions (4). According to the VA, over 80% of Veterans do not qualify for dental coverage (4). Many face socioeconomic challenges— nearly 1 in 4 Veterans live in rural areas— and studies show the prevalence of moderate-severe periodontitis is higher among Veterans compared to non-Veterans (55.0% vs. 40.0%) and caries experience was higher among Veterans as well (72.3% vs. 45.4%) (2,3). Safety-net providers such as dental schools and Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) play a critical role in bridging this gap. This pilot project aimed to increase access for underserved Veterans through same-day oral-systemic screenings and integration into ongoing care at the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry.



METHODS

The *Veterans Day Health and Wellness Event*, a pilot project held on Monday, November 11, 2024, at the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, provided streamlined oral-systemic healthcare access by offering free same-day dental screenings, full-mouth radiographs, and on-site registration into the school’s main clinic. Nearly 45 Veterans and family members attended, having either pre-registered or arrived as walk-ins. Upon arrival, attendees completed demographic and medical history forms, as part of the screening process. While awaiting care, participants had access to several educational stations, including an oral hygiene instruction table addressing the links between oral and systemic health, dietary risk factors, caries and periodontal disease prevention, and oral health management for patients with diabetes. An implant education table was also available to provide information on implant-supported and fixed prosthetic options. Free breakfast and coffee were provided to all guests throughout the event.

Dental screenings were conducted by second- and third-year dental students under faculty supervision and included full oral examinations with evaluations for caries, periodontal disease, and edentulism. Vital sign risk assessments— blood pressure and finger-stick blood glucose tests—were performed as part of our comprehensive screening. Importantly, attendees received same-day full-mouth radiographs, eliminating the need for separate diagnostic appointments and significantly accelerating the care timeline. Additionally, UOP Audiology provided free hearing screenings and consultations while attendees waited. This integrative, same-day model was designed to reduce barriers, enhance access, and pilot the feasibility of a replicable care pathway within a dental school setting.

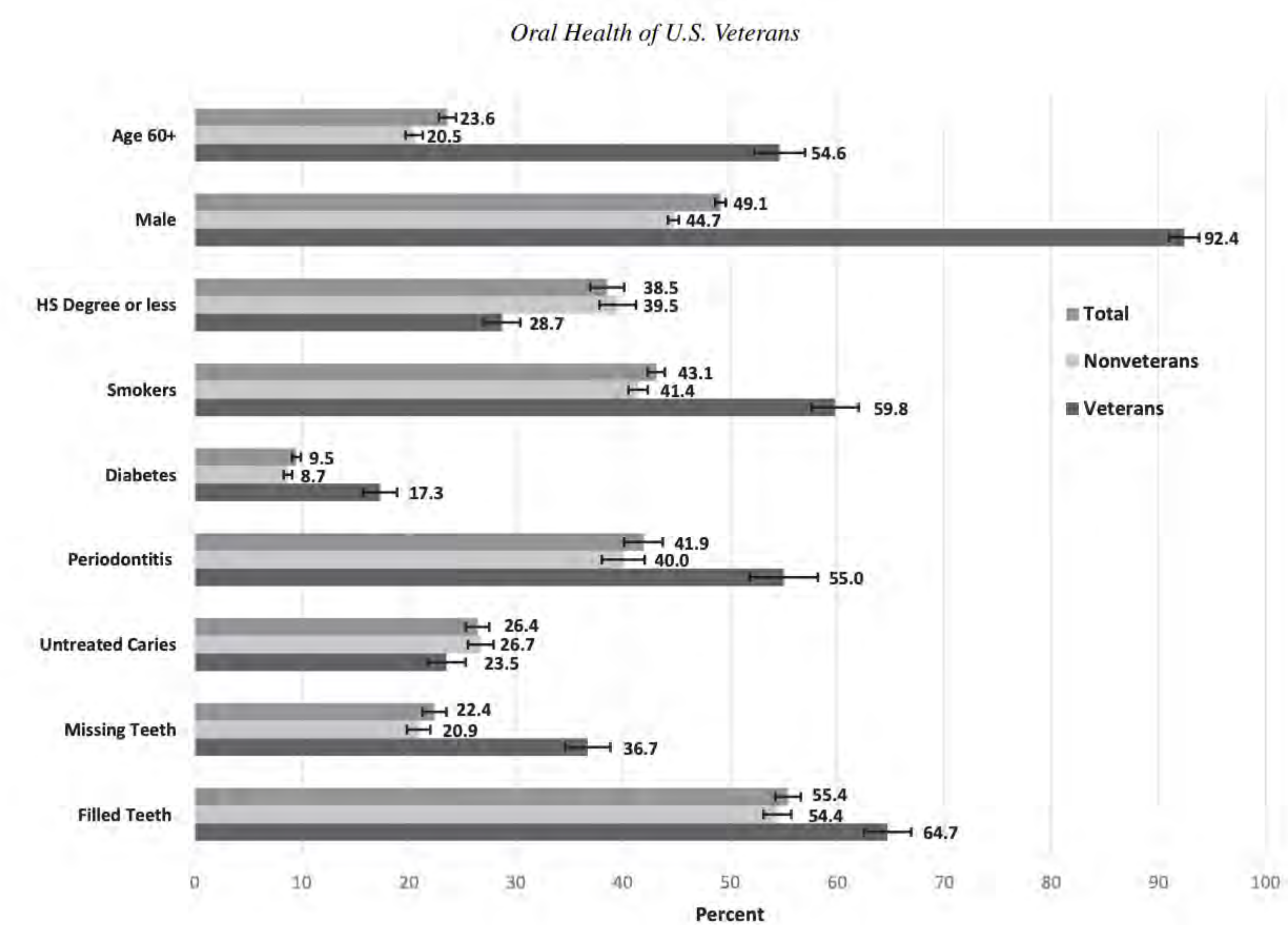


Figure 1. Distribution of select demographic, socioeconomic status, general health, and oral health conditions by Veteran status: U.S., 2011–2014. Estimates shown are weighted percent and standard error (error bars).
Note: Distribution of demographic, socioeconomic, and oral health conditions by veteran status. Reprinted from “Oral Health Status Among Adults With and Without Prior Active Duty Service in the U.S. Armed Forces, NHANES 2011–2014,” by D.K. Schindler, G.V. Lopez Mitnik, A.M. Soliván-Ortiz, S.P. Irwin, S. Boroumand, and B.A. Dye, 2021, Military Medicine, 186(1–2), p. e153. Copyright 2021 by Oxford University Press.

RESULTS

The Veterans Day event successfully delivered comprehensive oral and systemic health screenings to nearly 45 Veterans and family members. Intake records indicated that many participants had been living with chronic oral pain and functional-aesthetic concerns for years due to cost and lack of access. Of the attendees, 33 chose to enroll as new patients of record at the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, completing same-day full-mouth radiographs—an integration that typically requires multiple appointments at the dental school. Many participants expressed relief at receiving care that they had been unable to access for years. Although complete follow-up data is still being collected to assess patient return rates and continuity of care, the success of this event highlights the potential for same-day care models to effectively address access gaps for underserved populations. Given the positive response, plans are underway to replicate the event next year with refinements based on lessons-learned to improve logistics and expand interdisciplinary services. This pilot project’s results demonstrate that same-day care models can be both effective, implemented and scalable. Continued refinement of intake logistics and registration are needed.



CONCLUSION

This pilot project demonstrates that same-day screening and enrollment systems can be an impactful and scalable solution to improve access to care for underserved Veterans. By eliminating delays and offering a one-stop model for oral-systemic evaluation and clinic integration, dental schools can serve as essential safety-net providers. The initiative aligns closely with the Dugoni School’s Top 5 Strategic Directions—expanding access to care, advancing clinical excellence, strengthening community partnerships, and promoting innovation and service-learning. In addition to the clinical outcomes, the project highlighted opportunities to refine operational models for better serving this population. The success of same-day triage and referral into comprehensive care reinforces the need for streamlined care models in addressing access gaps for Veterans. The event also emphasizes the importance of ensuring continued care for Veterans through collaboration with safety-net providers like dental schools. This pilot serves as a steppingstone toward long-term solutions to enhance access to dental care for Veterans, with plans to refine logistics and expand services for future events.

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OKU Sutro Excellence Day Project Cover Sheet

Project Title

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Project Category

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