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## Healthy Smiles for All: Oral Health Initiatives for Virginia's Special Health Care Needs Patients

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# HEALTHY SMILES FOR ALL:

## ORAL HEALTH INITIATIVES FOR VIRGINIA'S SPECIAL HEALTH CARE NEEDS PATIENTS

**Dr. Brad T. Guyton; Chief Dental Officer, Delta Dental of Virginia and Colorado**

For nearly 57 million people in the U.S. with intellectual or developmental disabilities, visiting a dentist's office can be an overwhelming experience. Unfamiliar sights and sounds, physical examinations, new textures, and strange lighting all work together to create an environment that can be uncomfortable and, at worst, traumatic. The visit can be equally stressful for a caregiver who accompanies, arranges, and assists with getting their loved one to a dental appointment.

That's why Delta Dental of Virginia launched the Special Health Care Needs Dental Benefit Program for most group contracts.\* In addition to enhanced treatment delivery options, the expanded benefit provides covered members with intellectual or developmental disabilities the chance to visit a dental office, get acquainted with the environment, familiarize themselves with the tools and get to know the staff before ever being asked to "open wide."

What's included in the Special Health Care Needs Benefit?

1. Exams: Additional dental visits are covered as needed to help patients and their families understand what to expect before treatment.
2. Cleanings: Up to four dental cleanings in a benefit year.
3. Treatment delivery modifications that are necessary for dental staff to provide oral health care for patients with sensory sensitivities, behavioral challenges, severe anxiety, or other barriers to treatment. (Procedure code D9997: dental case management for patients with special health care needs)
4. The use of anesthesia when necessary to provide dental care.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry defines special health care needs as any physical, developmental, mental, sensory, behavioral, cognitive, emotional impairment, or limiting condition requiring medical management, health care intervention, and/or the use of specialized services or programs.

If you want to learn more about the Special Health Care Needs Benefit, there is an online library of information at <https://deltadentalva.com/special-health-care-needs-resources>.

The Special Health Care Needs Benefits Program is just one piece of a broader strategy to reduce barriers to oral health care for Virginia residents with disabilities. The Delta Dental of Virginia Foundation also partnered with the Virginia Department of Health to develop and fund Centers for Inclusive Dentistry.

While many safety-net clinics have long served Virginians with special healthcare needs, the new partnership funds adaptive equipment and specialized training to help even more providers meet the oral healthcare needs of persons with disabilities in their region.

The certification program launched in early 2023 with two participating clinics, Augusta Regional Dental Clinic, and Eastern Shore Rural Health System. Teams of four from both clinics attended a three-day training at the NYU Dentistry Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities. Through a combination of didactic and hands-on sessions, attendees learned how to better serve patients and families with special health care needs through effective communications, ergonomics, patient workflow adjustments, and desensitization techniques. Upon their return, staff from

both clinics participated in a year-long learning collaborative to put what they were taught into practice and share lessons learned.

Since its launch in 2023, two Virginia clinics are now certified Centers for Inclusive Dentistry, and the Foundation has recruited Carilion Clinic Dental Care and the VCU School of Dentistry to earn the certification later this year.

Oral health is integral to a person's overall health, and like you, we believe everyone deserves a healthy smile. The development of certification programs and the introduction of new benefits to expand access to oral health care is just the start. It's now about spreading the word and educating more families that care for loved ones with special health care needs about the resources and benefits that are accessible in Virginia.

Thank you for joining us on this journey to expand care and help improve the overall health and wellness of Virginia's special healthcare needs population.

**Note:** The Delta Dental of Virginia Foundation is committed to improving the oral health of all Virginians. Created in 2012 by Delta Dental of Virginia, the Foundation supports education, program development, and community partnerships that help create healthy smiles in Virginia through improved access to oral health care, education, and research.

*\*Additional Special Health Care Needs Benefits are covered at 100% with no deductible. Some benefits may be subject to the annual maximum based on the member's group benefit plan. The Special Health Care Needs Benefit is not currently available under Delta Dental of Virginia's Individual and Family™ plans.*