



Learning Collaborative: Communication and Community Engagement for Public Health in Texas



Post-Series Report Spring 2026

The Texas Oral Health Coalition (TxOHC) convened a four-part learning collaborative focused on strengthening communication and engagement skills among oral health, primary care, public health, and community health professionals in today's complex information environment.

This initiative began with a single question: How can we make difficult conversations easier? Whether discussing health and prevention recommendations in a dental clinic, primary care office, or directly with a community health worker (CHW)—the ways in which we show up and communicate with our patients and community not only matter but are fundamental to moving the needle on health.

The learning collaborative brought together 40 participants, chosen from a competitive pool of applications, from across the state's regions, including the Rio Grande Valley, the Panhandle, DFW, Central and South Texas, Houston and beyond. The multidisciplinary cohort included dentists, physicians, executive leaders, program managers, educators, public health students, and CHWs. Together, we sharpened our ability to handle the most difficult conversations in health today and uncovered strategies and best practices such as equipping and engaging the full care team, leading with empathy, building trust, and committing to ongoing learning.

Building trust and fostering community collaboration does not always require massive systemic overhauls. Often, the most profound impacts stem from small, intentional changes in our daily routines. Inside the clinic, this can be as simple as implementing a brief daily team huddle to ensure everyone is aligned, or intentionally empowering front-desk staff to set a welcoming, person-first tone the moment a patient arrives. During visits, it means consciously slowing down, utilizing open-ended questions, and shifting our goal from simply delivering information to actively checking for understanding. Outside the clinic, trust is nurtured by showing up consistently in accessible, everyday spaces – like local schools, faith centers, or even dollar stores – and leaning on peer advocates or Community Health Workers to bridge cultural gaps. By committing to these tangible, everyday actions, we ensure that our care environments remain respectful, accessible and genuinely responsive to the lived experiences of the people we serve.

Learning Collaborative Schedule

Four sessions occurred bi-weekly from February 25 – April 8, 2026. The learning collaborative was designed to be progressive, with each session building upon conversations from the previous sessions.

- February 25 | Session 1 | Understanding Our Starting Point: How We Currently Engage
- March 11 | Session 2 | Building Trust in Action: Exploring a Community Case Study
- March 25 | Session 3 | From Theory to Practice: Navigating Real Conversations
- April 8 | Session 4 | What's Working: Sharing Best Practices Across Texas

Insights

The learning collaborative generated highly actionable insights across four key pillars of community engagement:

1. Moving From Information Delivery to Understanding

Effective communication requires shifting the goal from simply delivering information to ensuring true patient understanding. Community members and patients frequently arrive with pre-formed opinions shaped by fragmented media rather than a blank slate of questions.

- **The CHW Bridge:** By moving beyond a top-down "compliance" mindset to one of collaboration, CHWs build vital cultural trust and connect isolated clinical advice to the realities of a patient's daily life. Several participating organizations reported that the collaborative directly catalyzed their efforts to formalize CHW integration into their care teams.

2. Building Trust in Action

Trust is the foundation of engagement, requiring time, visibility, cultural alignment, and consistency. In many communities and settings, the messenger matters just as much as the message.

- **Meeting the Community Where They Are:** Trust is built through consistent, authentic presence. Participants highlighted the importance of actions such as showing up consistently to community events. Making services or information available at everyday, accessible locations – schools, churches, community centers, or grocery stores – reduces barriers and increases comfort.

3. Navigating Real Conversations

Preserving trust during complex or skeptical conversations is an essential skill. Through role-playing real-world scenarios, the collaborative identified critical practices for clinical and administrative environments.

- **Leveraging the Entire Team:** Trust is often made or broken at the front desk. Providing transparency about wait times and utilizing daily "team huddles" to share context enables care teams to anticipate needs. Multiple clinical leaders cited the implementation of daily team huddles and the empowerment of front-desk staff as their primary, immediate takeaway from the series.

4. Sharing Best Practices: Cultural Humility

Advancing health requires moving beyond baseline cultural competence toward continuous cultural humility, a lifelong process of self-reflection, curiosity, and respect for individual lived experiences.

- **Avoiding Assumptions:** True community building means intentionally avoiding assumptions and honoring shared narratives. By asking open-ended questions and utilizing motivational interviewing, care teams create intentional spaces where all patients feel valued.

Demonstrated Impact and Participant Evaluation

The success of this learning collaborative highlights the significant desire for cross-sector learning and practical capacity-building across Texas. Post-series evaluations demonstrated overwhelming success in meeting the needs of the public health and clinical workforce:

- **Exceptional Value:** The collaborative received an overall rating of 4.75 out of 5, with the later sessions focused on real-world practice scoring perfect fives.
- **Universal Recommendation:** 100% of surveyed participants stated they would recommend the collaborative to their colleagues and networks.
- **Breaking Down Silos:** Participants consistently cited multidisciplinary networking and the realization that diverse communities face shared systemic challenges as the primary reasons they prioritized attending the series week after week.
- **Actionable Resources:** The post-session summaries and action toolkits provided to the cohort were universally praised as highly effective, translating high-level theory into immediate, localized public health actions.

Looking Forward: A Blueprint for Collaboration

The findings and overwhelming success of this learning collaborative represent more than just shared best practices; they are a direct reflection of the systematic transformation happening across Texas. By investing in initiatives like the learning collaborative, TxOHC and its partners are actively dismantling barriers to care.

Across Texas, the public health landscape continues to evolve. From complex urban centers to expansive rural communities, ensuring access to care requires more than traditional clinical delivery. Texas needs systemic, community-centered innovation. Recognizing this, the state has become a leading environment for pioneering initiatives that bridge the gap between health systems and community realities.

For community partners and allied organizations committed to advancing care, Texas offers a robust, highly engaged network. Together, we can continue to reignite, rebuild, and reimagine a health system that is better for everyone.

About the Texas Oral Health Coalition

TxOHC is a statewide collaborative dedicated to improving oral health to advance the health of all Texans. We are guided by a statewide advisory committee and led by Texas Health Institute. The diverse network of statewide and regional stakeholders in oral health includes community-based organizations, professional associations, clinicians, academic institutions, public health agencies, regional coalitions, philanthropic organizations, payors, advocacy organizations, and more.

Our Priorities:

- **Advancing Access:** Ensuring timely, affordable, and acceptable care by addressing barriers related to geography, affordability, and workforce shortages.
- **Protecting Public Health:** Emphasizing prevention and education as the foundation of lifelong health.
- **Bridging Oral and Overall Health:** Championing medical-dental integration to reflect a whole-person, whole-system approach to health care.

To learn more or connect with our team, please email convenings@texashealthinstitute.org.

This learning collaborative was hosted by the [Texas Oral Health Coalition \(TxOHC\)](#). TxOHC is funded by CareQuest Institute for Oral Health, with [Texas Health Institute](#) serving as the administrative home for the TxOHC team and work.

