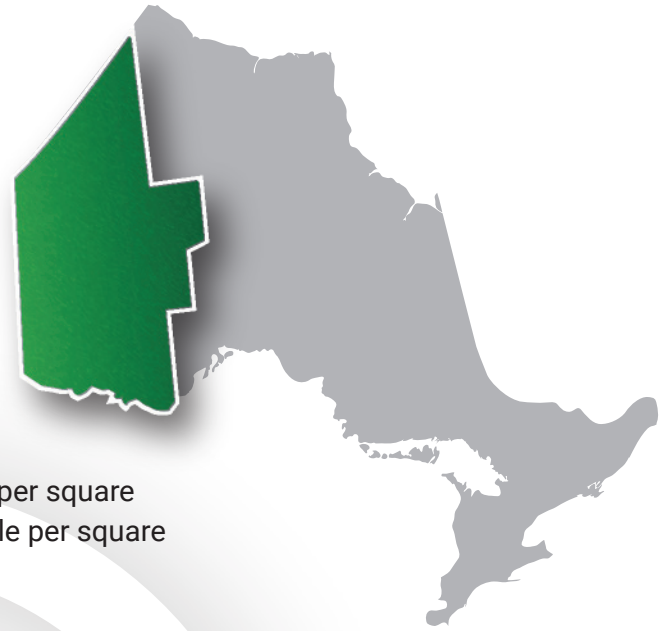




2021 Annual Report

BACKGROUND

Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) is the most westerly of Ontario's 34 public health units, serving the Kenora and Rainy River districts. The catchment area covers approximately one-fifth of Ontario's land mass and stretches across 173,828 square kilometres. It encompasses 19 municipalities, 39 official First Nations communities, and two unorganized territories. The population of approximately 82,000 is scattered across the region with a population density of approximately 0.5 people per square kilometre, compared with the provincial average of 14.1 people per square kilometre.



While NWHU covers a large area geographically, it is one of the smallest public health units in staffing, funding, and population. The large geographical area, combined with our dispersed population, demographics, and numerous remote communities, contributes to the health disparities in the region. The delivery of public dental health programs and services is unique and challenging due to these factors.

Dental decay rates in the NWHU region are double the provincial average and people with low incomes are least likely to have access to dental services. Access to dental care in the area is further negatively impacted by the expansive geography, shortage of dental providers, and economic strains related to living in the north.

Oral disease and illness remain problematic in our region with severe inequities in oral health status among socioeconomic groups. Some of these inequities in our region are: financial challenges, shortage of dental providers, geography, and transportation issues. Oral health not only impacts quality of life, but missing teeth and oral pain can impact speech, which foods we eat, how we socialize, and our employability.

NWHU's dental program has grown over the years from a primarily child-focused school-based service model to a more expansive model that includes expanded services, care settings, and age groups. Unfortunately, much of the funding allocated to many of the new programs and services was limited to clients who receive specific government-funded support programs, or with certain income thresholds. Over time, programs continued to expand, including the introduction of the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program (OSDCP). This program allowed us to expand our reach, reducing the risk of serious oral health issues and associated health problems for this older adult population.

The recent expansion of oral health services for adults has increased our reach to the vulnerable population in our region with access to services, and will help reduce unnecessary trips to the hospital, prevent chronic disease, and increase quality of life.

Although the expanded services helped many people, NWHU staff noted a portion of vulnerable people aged 18 to 64 were being missed. For many years, our dental team has turned away low-income adults or the working poor who were in pain and unable to access dental care as they didn't qualify for public dental insurance programs or have private insurance. Our team has heard many stories over the years about lack of access to dental care, tooth pain, and the financial burden of dental treatment.

Fortunately, in late 2020, a partnership was formed with Green Shield Canada to help bridge this gap. Green Shield Canada's "Green Door Project" (GDP) committed to providing an annual gift of \$120,000 for three consecutive years to allow NWHU to offer cost-free care for hundreds of eligible adults in the area who were unable to access care due to financial barriers. We will be working with University of Toronto (U of T) with the goal of gathering evidence on the impact access to oral health care has on the health and well-being of adults.

PLANNING

The new Green Door Project program required us to develop a new framework for service delivery. The framework outlined program eligibility, application and enrollment processes, coverage, and service delivery. An [application form](#), [fact sheet](#), and [website content](#) were created to implement the program. Collaboration with U of T's One Smile Research Group continues as they are in the stages of developing the pre- and post-treatment evaluation for clients for NWHU to use.

IMPLEMENTATION

On March 29, 2021, Green Shield Canada, U of T, and NWHU officially launched the program by announcing the new innovative dental public health program aimed at bridging the gap in local dental care delivery. Throughout 2021, the program was promoted and services were provided to eligible recipients.

Branding and advertising were done in collaboration with NWHU and the GDP lead and marketing team. Products developed to promote the program include decals, vehicle wraps, and web and print content. NWHU recently purchased a new mobile dental office (MDO), which includes the GDP logo on the rear of the vehicle which is highly visible for any vehicles following it.

COVID-19 was, of course, a top priority in 2021 for public health units. NWHU staff were redeployed to COVID-19 work, which caused delays in offering many of our regular programs, including our dental programs. In addition, some of our dental clinic construction projects were set back due to supply chain issues and lack of contractors. To fill this gap, in March 2021, private practice dentists and denturists began treating eligible GDP clients in our absence.



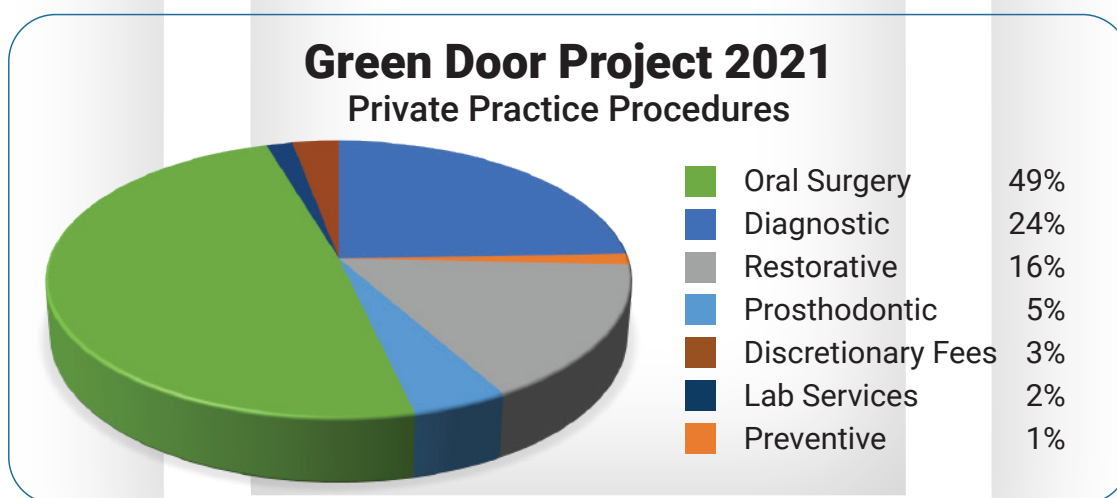
In May 2021, our dental team resumed service in our newly renovated two-operator dental clinic at the Mary Berglund Community Health Centre in Ignace, where GDP clients received care. For the rest of the year, we served eligible clients on the MDO in communities throughout the region.

NWHU has completed all internal processes for the U of T's One Smile Research Group. We await the arrival of the pre- and post-treatment evaluations for GDP clients which we will implement as soon as received.

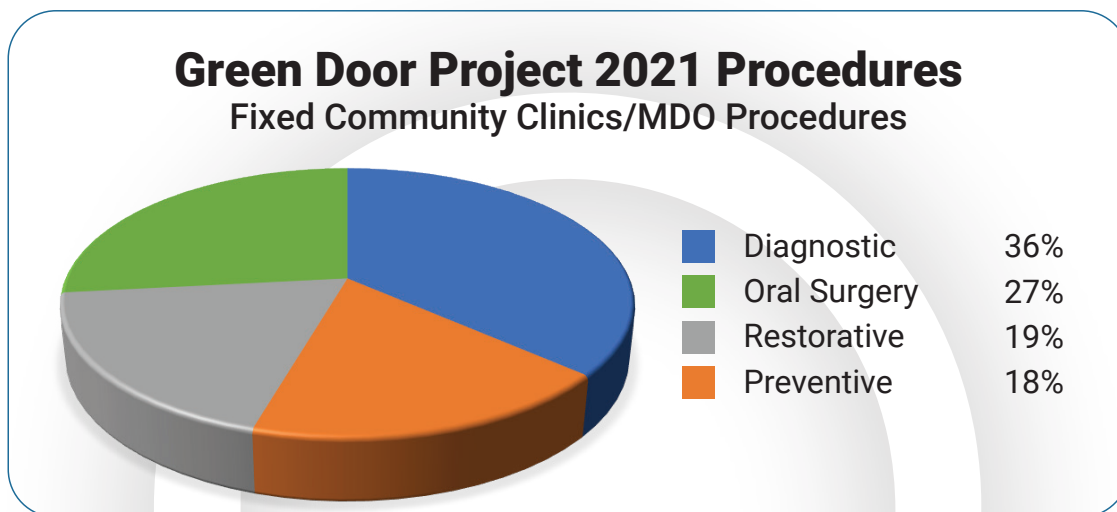
SERVICE DELIVERY

In 2021, NWHU received 84 applications from across the catchment area. Of these applicants, 77 were approved to access emergency dental care through a mixed-model approach, which means some received treatment at a NWHU clinic, on our MDO, or from a private practice dental provider. These clients were eligible for the following services: diagnostic, preventive, restorative, endodontic, prosthodontic, and oral surgery. Numerous clients expressed sincere gratitude for the opportunity to finally be able to receive free dental services.

Through the private practice model, which included dentists and denturists in four communities, 32 clients received dental care. In 61 visits, 238 procedures were completed; primarily diagnostic and oral surgery. Dental providers were reimbursed for their professional services for a total of \$35,127.73.



In the NWHU fixed clinic and mobile dental office visits, 31 clients received dental care in five communities. Over 71 visits, 268 procedures were completed; primarily diagnostic and oral surgery, with some preventive and restorative services. These sites offered free preventive services through the comprehensive treatment delivery plan. For services provided, the cost would have been \$23,625.00 with the same payment structure of the private practice model.



SUMMARY

Despite a delayed program launch, NWHU is pleased with the participation to date. Staff receive inquiries about the program weekly and continue to enroll, assess need, triage, and assist with accessing dental care.

The 2022 NWHU dental calendar looks promising with the completion of three fixed two-operator community clinics and two fully equipped, one-operator mobile dental offices. These clinic sites along with private practice providers will continue to address unmet dental needs of low-income adults who qualify for the Green Door Project to improve their quality of life. With our clinic expansions, we hope to recruit more staff to assist with operationalizing sites to full capacity. GDP recipients will reap the benefits of this expansion, and, with the help of One Smile Research Group, NWHU hopes to learn more about the impacts of increased access to care.

As the NWHU seeks to achieve its mission, “to improve the quality and length of life in our communities; health lifestyles, longer lives, lived well”, the organization’s Dental Health team is committed to helping reduce the challenges of accessing oral health care for all. The Green Door Project is helping to make this goal a reality.

Oral health is an integral part of overall health, and in addition to providing care, the Green Door project will look to track further, positive effects that oral health care may have on people’s health. This project will contribute to a massive body of research to establish the impact that access to oral health care has on any number of important markers of overall well-being: from overall health, to employability, to life satisfaction, and will improve the lives of adults in our catchment area.



I needed to get my Mom in for dental treatment because it was obvious she was suffering both physically and socially. This had gone on for months. She stopped being physically active, socially active - her self confidence was very low. Because of her teeth, eating certain solid (and nutritious) foods was quite difficult.

Following her procedures she was like a new person! Her mental and emotional state improved considerably and it was so nice having her join us at the table again for family meals. -Matt

I had been suffering significant dental pain when I noticed an ad in the paper for a new program that could possibly help me. After I signed up, I began hoping three years of pain could come to an end. It took that long because I simply could not afford the treatment previously. Thanks to NWHU and the Green Door Program the active infections and pain is gone which also means I can actually sleep through the night again! -Brian