



Children's
Oral Health
Network
of Maine

Theory of Change and Strategic Plan

June 2025



2025 Strategic Plan

Introduction: Purpose of This Document

The Children's Oral Health Network has spent the last seven years building a broad, inclusive, engaged and dynamic network of partners who are committed to the shared vision that all children in Maine will grow up free from preventable dental disease. This process has not just been about talking about what we want to achieve but has involved many early wins and innovation pilots as well as policy successes. It has been a process focused on listening, on understanding the wide range of perspectives on this issue, on gathering input and creative ideas about potential solutions, and on building the relationships and structures needed to enable collective action.

We are now ready to move from this initial stage of building the network, identifying the work we want to do together, and experimenting with a range of ways to do it into a full implementation stage, where now we can shift the balance of our collective energy more fully from developing and designing the network's structure to doing the work.

COHN is not a traditional non-profit organization. Like any complex systems change effort that aims to disrupt a long-standing status quo, our vision and mission cannot be achieved by a single organization. COHN was designed to be a [field catalyst](#), first described by the Bridgespan Group in a 2018 article:¹

Funders and nonprofits increasingly recognize that no single organization or strategy, regardless of how large or successful it may be, can solve a complex social challenge at scale. Instead, organizations need to work collaboratively to tackle pressing social problems. Enter a type of intermediary built to serve as a hub for spokes of advocacy and action, and roll all stakeholders toward a defined goal... These "field catalysts," which fit into an emergent typology of field-building intermediaries, help stakeholders summon sufficient throw-weight to propel a field up and over the tipping point to sweeping change.

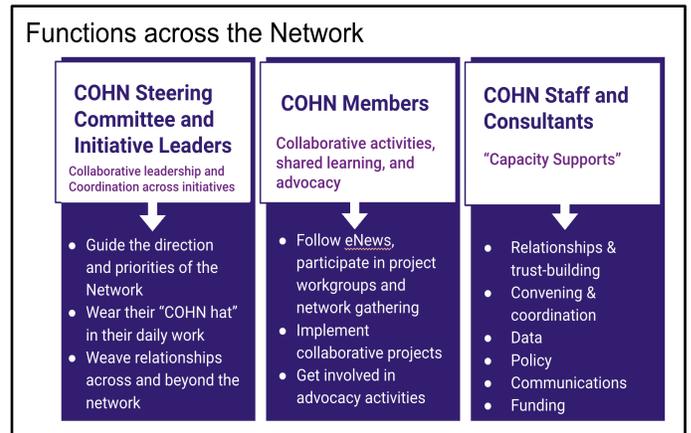
COHN's role as a field catalyst explains why this strategic plan may look a little different than the traditional strategic plan. As a working document, this plan lays out the core information that leaders of the network (Steering Committee, Board of Directors, Staff, and Initiative Leaders) need in order to see the forest as well as the trees. It documents the consensus of the network's leadership bodies that this is the way we view the challenge, provides a framework for our solutions, and guides how we are aligning our resources to deliver on COHN's mission and accomplish our shared vision. While we don't necessarily expect every member of the network to read it, we encourage those who are interested in the big picture to review it so that they can see the context that surrounds their individual effort within the network. It is also a tool for organizations who are part of the network to be able to engage their organizational leaders in understanding and fully investing in the network's collaborative activities.

For those who want more history and background on the Children's Oral Health Network, please visit our website at <https://www.mainecohn.org/>.

¹ Breen, B., Hussein, T., & Plummer, M. (2017). How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 16(1), 48–54. <https://doi.org/10.48558/9K95-QC55>

Roles/Collaborative Leadership Structure

The Children’s Oral Health Network of Maine (COHN) is a collaborative action-oriented network dedicated to improving children’s oral health by mobilizing partners and communities to transform oral health care in Maine. While COHN operates as a network of partners working toward a shared mission, a small 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization—officially named the Harry E. Davis Partnership for Children’s Oral Health—provides backbone support. Named in honor of Dr. Harry Davis, a respected Maine pediatrician, and funded by a multi-year commitment of core operating support from the Sadie & Harry Davis Foundation, the backbone 501(c)(3) provides the infrastructure necessary to sustain and advance the network’s initiatives.



COHN’s leadership structure is designed to ensure effective collaboration and strategic alignment across its initiatives. The Board of Directors oversees the Executive Director and holds fiduciary responsibility for the 501(c)(3), ensuring the sustainability and accountability of the organization. The Steering Committee works alongside the Board and staff to guide COHN’s strategic direction, shaping priorities and ensuring the network has the infrastructure needed to support its members. Initiative Leaders coordinate specific projects and programs, engaging Network members in collective action to drive COHN’s strategic priorities forward. Staff, along with consultants and contractors, provide essential support to these leaders and the broader network, ensuring alignment, progress, and access to expertise in key areas such as data, equity, communications, policy, and leadership development.

Values (What values and commitments ground our collective work?)

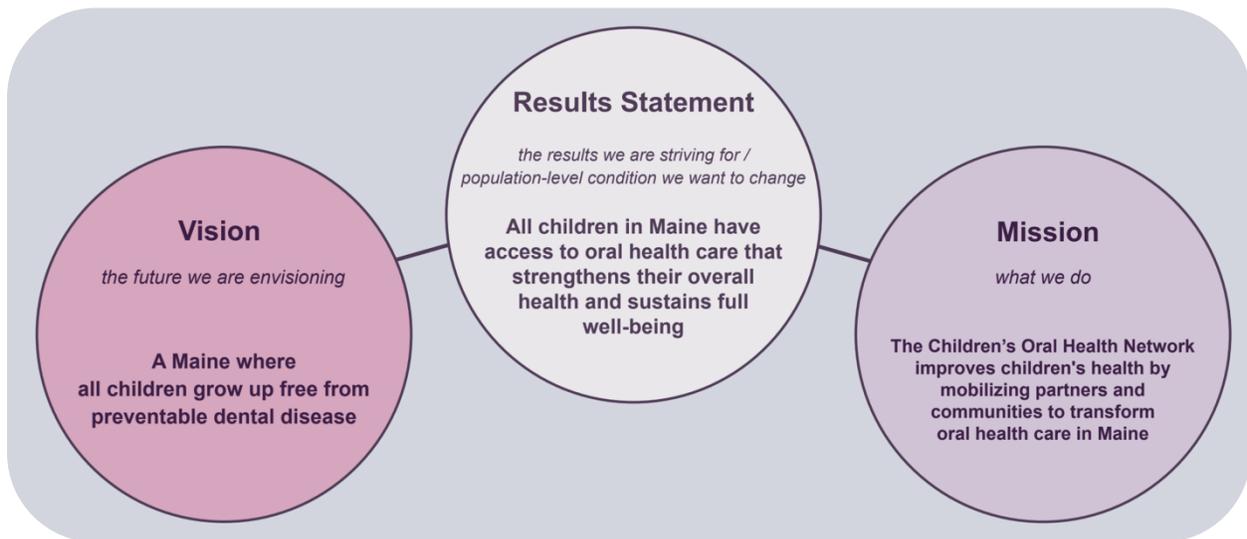
The Children’s Oral Health Network of Maine is grounded in a core set of principles that shape our collective work and commitment to equity. As agreed upon by the founding Partnership Council in the PCOH Operating Guidelines (2018), we hold ourselves and each other to a core set of guiding principles:

- Every child in Maine, regardless of their zip code or family circumstances, has a right to be free from the pain and burdens caused by dental disease.
- Families face systemic barriers to oral health that may be invisible; those who are affected by the problem should be involved in designing the solutions.
- We will work in partnership with government, support its role in solutions and honor its proper responsibility to protect the oral health of Maine children.
- We will listen deeply to understand all stakeholder perspectives, be transparent about our own organizational and individual interests, and be willing to prioritize our common goals.

Theory of Change

In 2023, COHN reached a key milestone in the network’s development, having formalized our structure and initiatives. Knowing that we would continue to evolve as the Network grew, we were ready to get more specific about our plans for shifting the mental models that drive access to oral health care. The theory of change framework, introduced to us through the USM Cutler Institute’s Data Innovation Project, offered a way to approach this.

Between June and September of 2024, the Board and Steering Committee worked through multiple drafts and revisions of the Theory of Change. In October, core staff participated in a data clinic with the Data Innovation Project, which informed further refinements. The Board and Steering Committee adopted the current version at their joint meeting in November. Over the next few months, we put the agreed-upon version to the test, developing objectives and strategies to guide the work of the staff, Steering Committee, and Board in 2025. We also drafted key data indicators to track progress on the results the Network is striving to achieve.



Strategies (How will the Network carry out its mission and achieve the desired results?)

The following diagram lays out the strategies that will be the focus of organized and proactive work by network action teams and initiatives. The strategies provide a framework to guide our annual objectives, encourage alignment of both collaborative and organizational activity across network partners, and determine the best use of network resources (both financial and human).

The Results Statement above, the Root Causes (page 6), and the Strategies (page 4) make up our Theory of Change, depicted more broadly in the diagram on page 5.

Strategies

Network	Data	Engagement	Policy	Education	Infrastructure
<p>Cultivate partners and support collaborative leadership and shared decision-making on behalf of the Network. Keep members informed of the work that is happening to enable broad participation, engagement, coordination, and collaboration.</p>	<p>Develop data tools that assess the capacity of the care delivery system, the extent of the unmet need, and what groups of children are systematically underserved.</p>	<p>Promote the understanding that we are in a dental crisis and that we have proven strategies and innovative resources to resolve this crisis.</p>	<p>Engage Network partners in efforts to help policy makers understand why this issue is important, why the system is insufficient as structured, and what policies are needed to achieve COHN's shared vision.</p>	<p>Build trust that community and medical settings are appropriate places in which to receive quality oral health care from a broader range of health professionals and empower community members to support this care.</p>	<p>Grow community-based care delivery models to get more preventive care and early intervention to children in more places. Ensure sustainable financing for these models.</p>
<p>EQUITY Identify specific inequities, the systemic design flaws that cause them, and the changes needed to eliminate them and ensure that all COHN strategies mitigate these historical inequities and don't create new ones.</p>					
<p>Bring in and maintain sufficient resources to carry out the Network's work and accomplish goals, and manage the Network's resources effectively.</p>	<p>Restore Maine's oral health surveillance system to ensure Maine CDC can monitor trends in dental disease outcomes.</p>	<p>Build relationships with communities that are experiencing disparities and support community-led organizations to co-design and co-implement solutions.</p>	<p>Advocate for sufficient staffing and funding for oral health priorities and other policy changes needed to expand community-based care.</p>	<p>Through deploying evidence-based strategies and teaching mouth-healthy habits early in life, help families make the essential connection between oral and overall health.</p>	<p>Build a robust, creative, and diverse oral health workforce in Maine where all providers can work at the top of their license / scope of practice and deliver community-based care.</p>

Describing the COHN Theory of Change



The Current State
(The problem)

Preventable dental disease is the most common chronic condition impacting Maine children

Root Causes:
The underlying causes that are driving the problem we are trying to solve.

Mission Statement

The Children’s Oral Health Network improves children’s health by mobilizing partners and communities to transform oral health care in Maine.

Collective Action: Network projects and initiatives
(How the Network organizes collaborative work towards the future vision)

From the First Tooth	Maine Dental Connection	School OH Blueprint & Cumberland County Pilot	Maine Oral Health Funders’ Transformation Initiative
	Health Integration Action Team	COHN Policy Initiatives	OH Equity Collaborative
			OH Industry Partnership



Strategies and Capacity Supports
(Backbone support that helps the Network get the work done)

EQUITY

 NETWORK	 DATA	 ENGAGEMENT	 POLICY	 EDUCATION	 INFRASTRUCTURE
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The Future
(What we are striving to achieve)

Shared Vision:
A Maine where all children grow up free from preventable dental disease.

Results Statement:
All children in Maine have access to oral health care that strengthens their overall health and sustains full well being.



Root Causes

(Why do we think these are the right strategies to accomplish the desired result?)

We understand the following root causes to be key barriers to the population-level condition we are trying to achieve, that all children in Maine have access to oral health care that strengthens their overall health and sustains full well-being. Acknowledging these barriers informs both our long-term strategies and our shorter term objectives, and enables us to directly address the root of the problem rather than the symptoms.

- Oral health contributes directly to overall health. There is a pervasive misunderstanding of this critical interconnection, which has been reinforced by a legacy of siloing dental health from broader health care.
- Dental care delivery and financing systems must be reimagined to meet the oral health needs of Maine's population.
- The design of the traditional dental system exacerbates the impacts of systemic racism, discrimination, poverty, and other disparities in access to care and therefore oral health outcomes.
- We must use our better and more comprehensive understanding of dental disease to inform solutions for treating and managing it as a chronic disease.
- Expanding and diversifying the dental workforce will help ensure delivery of community-based and minimally invasive care at the scale needed to serve all Maine children.
- There is insufficient infrastructure within state government to support strategies to address oral health as a public health issue.



Assumptions

As the Steering Committee and Board discussed the root causes and strategies, we realized that there were a number of unspoken assumptions that were guiding our collective understanding of the problem and the solutions. Thus, we recognized that it was important to explicitly state the following assumptions that underlie our theory of change and the network's strategies:

- Relationship-building & funding (for both backbone support and for implementation partners) are essential to fuel network strategies.
- Increased access to care (the right kind of care in the right place at the right time) leads to better oral health outcomes (reduced dental disease). Tracking access and utilization measures is more feasible, while impact evaluation and tracking disease outcome measures requires a bigger investment of resources.
- A complete oral health workforce includes dentists, hygienists, dental therapists, primary care providers, school nurses, oral health navigators, community health workers, and other public health care partners working in teams with all providers working to the top of their scope/license produces a more efficient and effective workforce.
- Sustainable financing means that the new models or expanded workforce do not have to rely on grant funding, volunteers, or donations for ongoing routine operations, rather sufficient financing for the desired models is built into the way the system is designed and operates.
- Our vision is focused on children, but children live in families and families live in communities so the system changes we seek will impact beyond children, and need to be intentionally designed to work for everyone.
- This work is multi-generational and by focusing primarily on children we will hopefully see increased impact as today's children become the next generation of parents.
- Right now, many kids CAN'T get any dental care at all and we are designing a transformed system in which it will be POSSIBLE for all kids to access the right care in the right place at the right time. If we get to the point where it is possible but people still aren't taking advantage of it, then we may need to evolve our theory of change to analyze what the root causes are for why people aren't utilizing the care that is universally available.
- Poverty, food insecurity, inadequate diet, and ineffective social systems for people facing systemic discrimination contribute to poor oral health, and while COHN may indirectly address these factors through promoting mouth-healthy habits, they are bigger issues beyond our zone of impact.

Equity Statement

Developed by the Steering Committee in 2022 and endorsed by the Network membership at the June 2022 Network Gathering

The Children's Oral Health Network of Maine is committed to addressing oral health disparities by centering equity in all aspects of our work. The lack of an equitable oral health system results in worse outcomes overall, and systemic racism and discrimination have led to particular inequities in oral health outcomes, particularly for communities of color, families with low incomes, and other marginalized populations.

Racial inequality persists as one of the most pervasive types of inequality, and its impacts on oral health are clear. The systems of economic injustice are inextricably intertwined with racial injustice. As such, by taking an antiracist approach to our oral health solutions, COHN aims to address the other inequities that we know persist for other communities facing systemic oppression of all types.

We work to create as many pathways to oral health as possible from an early age, including bringing oral health care to where children already are and ensuring sustainable financing of the oral health system to create equal opportunities for all to access care. Within this work, we are building structures that address the extra barriers facing communities of color, families with low incomes, and other marginalized populations as they seek oral health care.

COHN strives to co-create a culture of equity with partners within our Network, interprofessional health providers, and everyone who interacts with the dental system. We practice shared decision-making, create feedback processes to refine the Network's efforts, and grow capacity among our Network members to build an equitable oral health system for all people in Maine. Community voices inform the design of the solutions we create so we can truly drive forward systems change that works for those who have historically been underserved.

This is a journey, and we have more work to do. COHN is committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of our work to transform oral health systems. These values are essential to accomplishing our shared vision: a Maine where ALL children can grow up free from preventable dental disease. Unless we focus the work on those facing the greatest inequities, we will never get there. We will lean on these values, reflect, grow, and adapt as our Network continues to build an equitable oral health system.

Measurable Goals (How will we know we are making progress toward our desired results?)

We will use the following specific measurable goals to track the Network's progress. Quantitative indicators underneath each of these will be tracked over time and will be made available to the entire Network through a data dashboard.

- i. Improve **dental disease status** among children
- ii. Increase the number of (insured) children who are **accessing/utilizing routine preventive care**, and reduce disparities by insurance type
- iii. Increase the number/proportion of (insured) children who are **accessing/utilizing minimally invasive care**, and reduce disparities by insurance type
- iv. Increase the number of **community-based sites** where regular preventive dental care (including foundational, advanced, and full VDH) is being delivered by network-connected providers
- v. Expand the **dental workforce** to be more interdisciplinary, preventively oriented, integrated, diverse, and better able to utilize the full scope of practice for licensed professionals
- vi. Strengthen **state government capacity** to improve oral health (staffing, budget, data surveillance tools)
- vii. Increase **philanthropic investment** in coordinated oral health efforts

Objectives (How will we focus our immediate work on the strategies to make progress this year?)

Each year, the COHN Steering Committee, Board and staff will develop specific annual objectives to guide work on the COHN strategies (listed below and described more fully in the diagram on page 4). The current year's objectives can be found [here](#).

- Network Backbone Support
- Data
- Engagement
- Equity
- Policy
- Education
- Care Delivery Infrastructure

In Closing

COHN is a working network that depends on the active engagement and collaborative leadership of network members to carry out our collective mission and achieve our shared vision. The Steering Committee is developing strategies to support more network members in developing and utilizing their leadership “muscle.” We invite all who are interested to get actively involved in implementing and leading the important work laid out in this strategic plan. Together we can make Maine a place where all children can grow up free from preventable dental disease. Our children are depending on us!



Children's Oral Health Network of Maine

Join us to help ensure all children in Maine can grow up free from preventable dental disease!





BE IN TOUCH WITH IDEAS

We are always looking for new ideas and partners. Be in touch with any suggestions about how we can support your efforts to improve oral health.



CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE

Learn more about what we are doing and how you can get involved by checking out our website:
www.maineohn.org



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Stay in-the-know with our monthly e-news, along with the occasional legislative action alert. Use the QR code above or sign up at:
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