Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine received two, five-year grants, totaling nearly $2.6 million.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) is supporting pre- and post-doctoral training programs in dental public health in an effort to combat disparities in oral health.

Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine received two, five-year grants, totaling nearly $2.6 million. The funding will support efforts to close the gap between those with and those without dental care.

The dental school is located near 10 Cleveland neighborhoods identified by HRSA as having fewer than one dentist for every 5,000 people.

The problem of limited access to dental care isn't going away, said Sena Narendran, associate professor of community dentistry and principal investigator of the new grants.

The first grant received focuses on pre-doctoral training programs and awarded $1.281 million for the school's Family First Program and soon-to-be-established dual degree in Doctor of Dental Medicine and Masters of Public Health.

Family First is a collaborative effort of the Departments of Family Medicine and Nutrition, and the school is collaborating with Case Western Reserve School of Medicine's Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics to implement the dual degree program.

The second grant focuses on a post-doctoral training program in dental public health and awards $1.29 million to support a residency program at the School of Dental Medicine. Dental public health residents will have placement in community health centers and public health agencies.

Addressing oral health disparities starts early in Case Western Reserve dental students' education. After their first-year cornerstone experience in the Healthy Smiles Sealant Program that provides free dental exams to the public, as well as cleanings and sealants for second and sixth graders in the Cleveland Municipal School District, second-year dental students engage in an experiential learning program called Family First.

Family First focuses on assessing risk for dental diseases from a whole-family and multigenerational perspective. Students look at factors from eating habits to general health problems in the family. Family First integrates family medicine and nutrition with dental care.

"Most members of a family seek care from one dentist," Narendran said.

The Family First learning experience was formalized last year and is a win for both students and families in need of dental care.

Currently 18 families from Cleveland, most with three generations and one with five generations, are being assessed for their dental needs. Student teams from the sophomore dental school class are seeing a total of 72 family members.

Both grants also include partial faculty and administrative support to the programs. The post-doctoral grant will also offer a stipend, tuition, and travel.