

Pacific Northwest University Unveils Delta Dental Equity Hall Future Home of Washington State's Second Dental School

Innovative New Dental School Focused on Serving Rural & Underserved Communities to be First in Nation to Offer Students Three Years of Full-time Immersive Training at Community Health Centers in Tacoma, Kennewick, Yakima and Beyond

YAKIMA, Wash. – Sept. 28, 2024 – Washington state's second [dental school](#) – the first in the nation to offer students three years of immersive training at community health centers serving rural and other medically underserved communities – was celebrated at a public ribbon-cutting ceremony and open house attended by approximately 200 dental professionals and community members today at [Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences](#) (PNWU) as the school prepares for its first class in fall of next year.

The dental school's new home is named **Delta Dental Equity Hall** in recognition of the shared commitment to improving equitable access to dental care statewide by both PNWU and [Delta Dental of Washington](#), which committed \$12 million in funding to make the innovative school of dental medicine a reality.

Delta Dental Equity Hall – designed by D.G. Orr Architecture and built by [Lydig Construction](#) – features 30,000-square-foot of state-of-the-art dental school classroom, simulation workspace and lab for training the next generation of primary care dentists, which will also honor the history of dental health equity milestones and leaders through room-naming and artwork/storytelling installations currently in development.

The school's aim is to help increase equitable access to dental care and will be uniquely focused on serving rural and other medically underserved communities which are increasingly experiencing a critical dental workforce shortage contributing to a disproportionate incidence of oral health issues.

According to a 2022 American Medical Association *Journal of Ethics* [article](#), nationally most dentists are located in urban areas, whereas only 14% of dentists practice in rural areas where 20% of the U.S. population lives.

When it opens to students next fall, the state's second dental school will train 36 dental students per year alongside PNWU health sciences students in preparation for working in collaborative and integrated healthcare environments, and which reflects the direct connection between oral and overall health. Following one year of on-campus training, PNWU will be the first dental school in the nation in which students will have three years of full-time immersive training at one of three federally qualified health centers located in [Tacoma](#), [Kennewick](#) and [Yakima](#).

"Most dental disease is preventable, but you can't prevent oral health issues if you don't have access to care," said Delta Dental of Washington President & CEO Mark Mitchke. "I'm so proud that Delta Dental Equity Hall will be home base for a new generation of dental students focused on building a future where everyone can enjoy good oral health with no one left behind."

“With the completion of Delta Dental Equity Hall, we’re one step closer in our efforts to revolutionize community-based oral health,” said PNWU School of Dental Medicine Founding Dean Fotinos Panagakos, DMD, PhD. “The groundswell of community support we’ve received for our new school of dental medicine will have a lasting impact on the oral health of rural and medically underserved communities, here in Washington and beyond, which for too long have had limited access to care.”

In addition to Delta Dental of Washington’s landmark \$12 million commitment, PNWU’s School of Dental Medicine has also received \$5 million in state funding with additional generous support from Washington State Dental Association Foundation, Pierce County, foundations and individual donors.

About PNWU

Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences (PNWU) educates and trains health care professionals emphasizing service among rural and medically underserved communities throughout the Northwest. The grassroots, non-profit health sciences university was established in 2005 by a group of visionary community leaders in Washington’s fertile Yakima Valley.

PNWU’s 70-acre campus boasts a collaboration-inspiring array of health sciences disciplines, all united under the University’s vision of revolutionizing community health. Featuring six active health sciences programs, including a nationally ranked College of Osteopathic Medicine, School of Physical Therapy, School of Occupational Therapy, a Master of Arts in Medical Sciences program, and Washington State University’s Nursing and Pharmacy programs. PNWU’s campus is abuzz with a diverse collection of healthcare professional students committed to bringing compassionate care to rural and medically underserved communities throughout the Pacific Northwest.

About Delta Dental of Washington

Founded 70 years ago by Seattle area dentists who set out to revolutionize oral health care, an innovative program was developed to provide longshoremen’s children access to dental care – and the concept of dental benefits was born. Today [Delta Dental of Washington](#), a not-for-profit, is the state’s leading dental benefits provider covering nearly 4 million people statewide and beyond.

Through corporate philanthropy, oral health advocacy, and funding the [Arcora Foundation](#), Delta Dental plays a vital role in making dental care more equitable and accessible, increasing dental health education with an emphasis on youth, and expanding diversity at all levels within the dental profession. These collective efforts aim to improve oral health care in Washington so all people can enjoy good oral and overall health with no one left behind. Delta Dental of Washington is part of the Delta Dental Plans Association, consisting of 39 independent, affiliated member companies. For more information, visit: www.deltadentalwa.com.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Interviews and additional photos & video available upon request.

ADDITIONAL QUOTES:

Washington State Sen. Curtis King (14th District)

Building upon the outstanding results that we have seen from PNWU’s medical programs, it is exciting to have the addition of a new dental school. The addition of new dentists will be of great benefit to the Yakima Valley, Eastern Washington, as well as the state of Washington, especially with the emphasis on expanding into the rural areas that need it the most.

Wayne Miller, Acting President, Pacific Northwest University

“The completion of Delta Dental Equity Hall coincides with our recent accreditation from the Commission on Dental Accreditation. This means PNWU is totally ready for our first class of students who will be here next Fall. This wonderful facility will allow PNWU to continue fulfilling its mission by now educating dental students from rural and medically underserved areas and returning them home to serve their communities as well-trained

dentists. This facility would not be here without the support of many across the entire state, and particularly Delta Dental of Washington. We are very grateful!"

John Vornbrock, Chair, PNWU Board of Trustees

"This is truly an important milestone for our University and our partners as we work towards the start-up of the School of Dental Medicine and the training of new generations of community dental providers. The impact that these dentists will have to the oral health of the communities that they will serve is immense. We are very grateful for the support provided by Delta Dental, and this is appropriately recognized in the name of the new building. Congratulations to all who have worked so hard to make this important event possible."

Lolinda Turner, Director of Student Success & Engagement, PNWU

"This historic moment demonstrates PNWU-SDM's efforts to increase oral health for rural and underserved communities in Washington state, and it will allow the school to attract dental students from and resemble all the diverse communities and provide access as dental providers who represent their community."

Linda J. Edgar, DDS, MEd, President, American Dental Association

"Communities in Washington State and around the nation are significantly affected by the lack of dentists and other dental care professionals in rural areas. With its new training facility, the PNWU School of Dental Medicine is charging a path forward to improve oral health equity and address geographical disparities. It can serve as a national model for training future generations of dentists."

Chris Dorow, DDS, President, Washington State Dental Association

"Being a second-generation dentist in Othello I have seen firsthand access decrease but at an even steeper rate, the loss of choice. The opening of the PNWU School of Dental Medicine will be a huge asset in reversing that trend. The completion of Delta Dental Equity Hall is a giant step in completing the school and reversing the trend of loss of dental choice in Eastern Washington."

Nathan Russell, DDS, Immediate Past-President, Washington State Dental Association

"Currently, Washington state only trains a quarter of its dentist workforce in state. Building a new dental school in Washington creates more opportunities for our residents to be trained as dentists locally, which increases the likelihood that they will remain. Training these students in locations that will expand our dental safety net infrastructure is a win-win."

"PNWU will be preparing well-trained dentists who both represent their communities and who have a desire to stay in this region, and that has a tremendous potential to change the trajectory for so many people in our state that need access to quality care from highly trained dentists. The launch of PNWU is both timely and critical."