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Hamilton County cited costs in closing dental clinic. Records provide a fuller picture.

July 18, 2026 by Elizabeth Fite



Dentist Jon Salinas didn't learn Hamilton County would refer displaced patients to his practice until weeks after officials had already announced plans

to close the county's dental clinic but said he welcomes the opportunity to treat them.

After more than 40 years of service, the Health Department dental clinic saw its last patient on June 30, with colorful murals still on the walls and a bilingual notice announcing the clinic's permanent closure taped to the reception window.

During its final fiscal year, which ended that day, the clinic served nearly 2,000 unique patients, many of them low-income children from Chattanooga's most underserved neighborhoods.

CHATTANOOGA TIMES FREE PRESS READER POLL

Question 1 of 1

Hamilton County officials said the Health Department dental clinic became too costly to justify and that community dental providers, such as Salinas, could absorb former patients.

"We evaluated all aspects, which is why we engaged in conversations with partners who can effectively meet the needs of our clients," Joeli Pifer, communications manager of Hamilton County Health and Social Services, said in a phone interview.

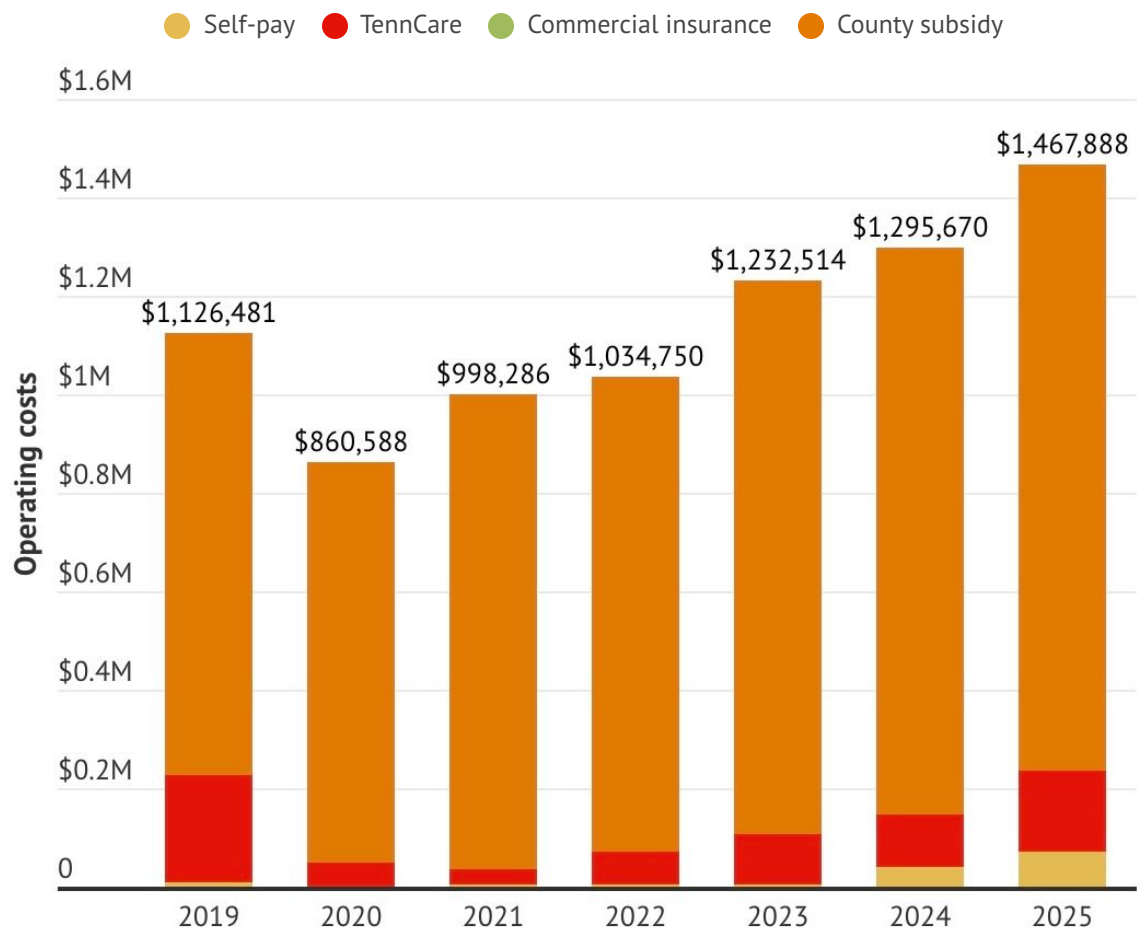
County financial records obtained by the Chattanooga Times Free Press support officials' conclusion that the clinic required substantial county subsidies – more than \$1.2 million last calendar year. The records also show the clinic was serving more patients, generating more revenue and becoming

less expensive on a per-patient basis as it recovered from the COVID pandemic – trends not mentioned in the county’s public announcement.

Interviews and internal documents also provide new insight into how county officials planned the transition of patients to community providers.

Funding sources for Health Department dental clinic

Outside revenue covered a portion of the dental clinic’s annual expenses, leaving the county to fund the remaining costs each year.



Source: Hamilton County Health Department

Donald Chi, a University of Washington professor, board-certified pediatric dentist and health services researcher whose work focuses on improving

access to dental care for underserved children, said public health departments don't necessarily have to provide every clinical service themselves.

But when they stop doing so, he said, the measure of success is whether patients continue receiving care.

WHY IT CLOSED

Hamilton County officials have cited the dental clinic's financial performance from 2021 to 2025 as the primary reason for its closure, saying annual operating costs increased from about \$998,000 to nearly \$1.47 million during that period, highlighting a more than 500% increase in dental supply costs.

Although dental supply costs rose sharply during that period, supplies remained a relatively small share – about 5% – of the clinic's overall operating budget. The county's analysis also begins after an unprecedented drop in patient volume during the pandemic.

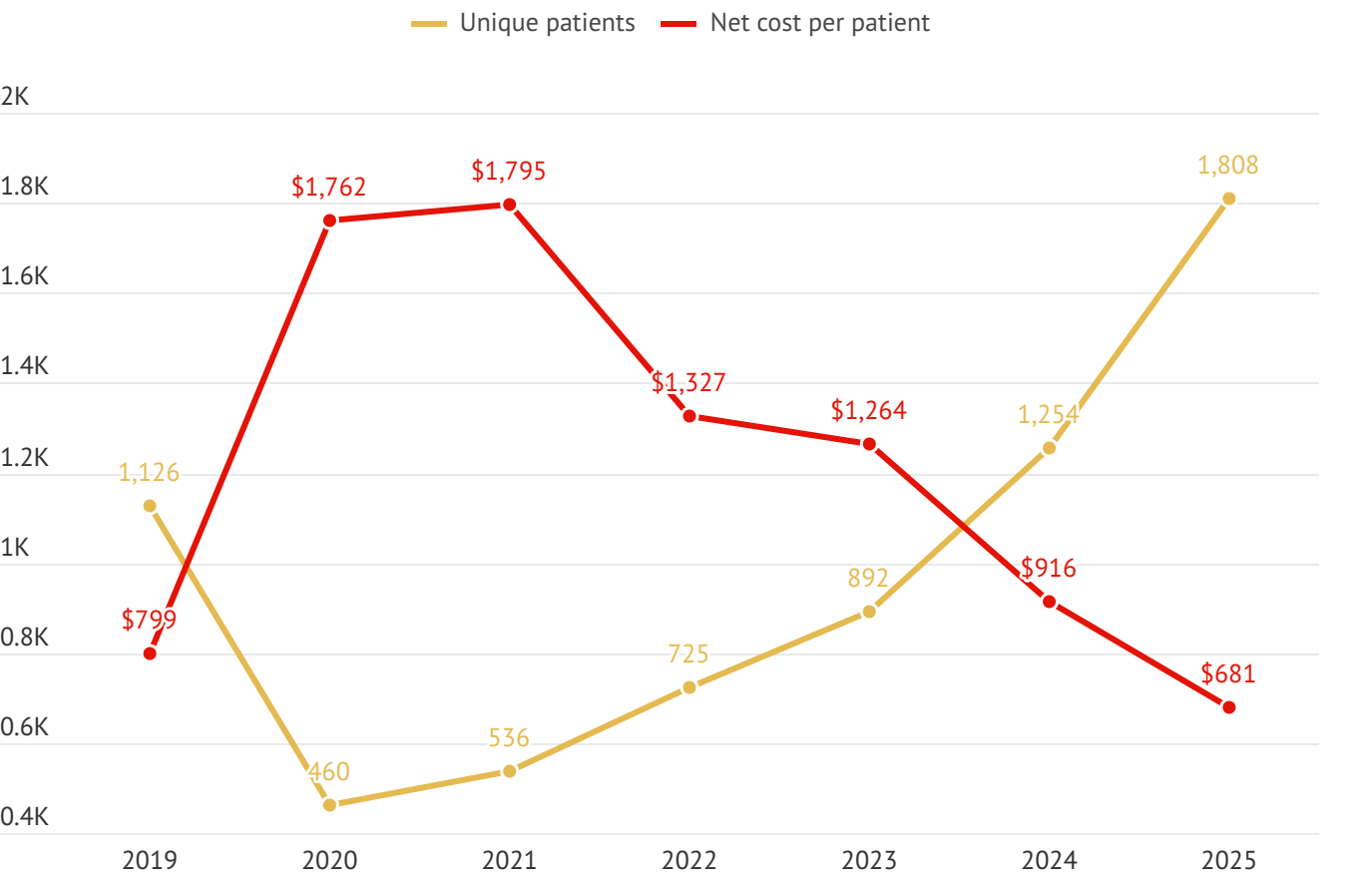
The clinic served 1,126 unique patients in 2019 before patient volume fell to a seven-year low in 2020. By 2025, that number had climbed to 1,808 – the highest during the seven-year period reviewed. At the same time, the clinic's net cost per patient fell from a high of nearly \$1,800 in 2021 to a low of about \$681 in 2025.

The county's announcement in May emphasized that the clinic recovered about 16 cents in revenue for every dollar spent on the clinic. Financial records show that the clinic's actual revenue as a percent of actual costs had quadrupled from a pandemic low of about 4 cents on the dollar in 2021, though

those gains remained below pre-pandemic levels and were not enough to offset rising operating costs.

Health Department dental clinic unique patients and cost per patient

As the dental clinic recovered from the COVID pandemic, patient volume reached its highest level while the county's net cost per patient reached a seven-year low.



Source: Hamilton County Health Department

Pifer said the county intentionally used 2021 as a baseline because officials believed it demonstrated that reducing operations would not solve the clinic's underlying financial problems.

"We felt like it was a good baseline for us, because it was a scaled-down version, and so we saw that even with a scaled-down version, the cost per patient skyrocketed," Pifer said. "So we knew that even if we did a scaled-down version again, it would further strain the clinic, and we knew that that wasn't our best option to save money."

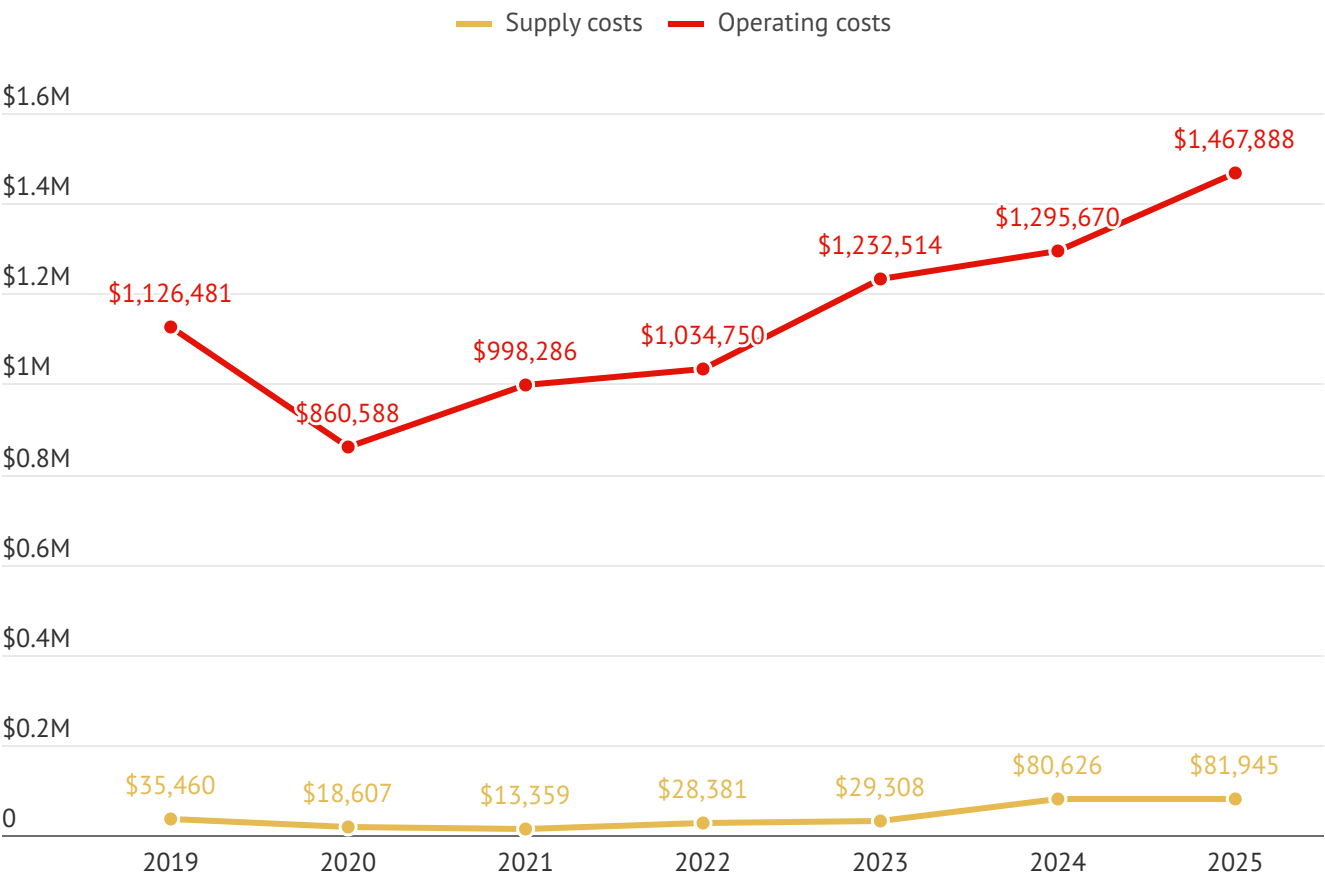
Internal records show county officials were discussing closing the dental clinic as early as Feb. 2.

A draft memo from Chief Operating Officer David Roddy to county commissioners said the recommendation to shutter the practice followed a "comprehensive review of operational and budgetary efficiency." According to Pifer, Health Department Administrator Beka Bohannon recommended closing the clinic, and the decision was developed collaboratively over several months with county leadership before being finalized.

The clinic closure eliminated 13 positions and two vacant jobs as part of \$2.7 million in approved cuts to the county's Health and Human Services Division. It also continues a broader shift away from county-run clinical services over the past two budget cycles, including the closure of health centers in Ooltewah and Soddy-Daisy.

Health Department dental clinic supply costs and total costs

Operating costs rose over the seven-year period, while dental supply costs remained relatively stable until more than doubling in 2024 and 2025.



Source: Hamilton County Health Department

Because they often serve patients with greater barriers to care, higher no-show rates and more advanced diseases requiring longer visits – while also relying more heavily on lower Medicaid reimbursement and caring for more uninsured patients – public health clinics can look financially inefficient on paper, said Chi, the Washington professor.

"Public health just isn't set up in many ways to be run like a private practice office," Chi said.

Even though many private pediatric dentists accept Medicaid, known as TennCare in Tennessee, Chi said they typically balance those patients with commercially insured families and a mix of shorter preventive visits and longer restorative procedures. Public health clinics generally don't have that flexibility.

"It has nothing to do with the skill of the provider," he said.

TRANSITION PLANNING

County officials said they concluded community providers could fill the gap left by the clinic's closure after reviewing data and consulting with existing providers.

The Times Free Press requested records documenting how county officials reached that conclusion, including any capacity analyses. Among the documents the county released was a Feb. 2 budget planning document stating, "Clínica Médicos has brand new pediatric clinic with full schedule open," referring to the pediatric dental practice operating on Clínica Médicos' Southside campus.

Although county officials referred to the practice as Clínica Médicos, it had been independently owned and operated by Salinas under the name Chatty Kids since July 2025.

Salinas, a pediatric dentist whose career has focused on caring for Medicaid and uninsured children in safety-net settings, said the practice currently serves about 950 patients – 85% insured through TennCare, 10% self-pay or uninsured and 5% commercially insured.

Photo Gallery

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The practice could absorb more than 1,000 new patients over the next year, according to Salinas.

"I would be excited about actually using the clinic to the capacity that it was built out for," he said.

Routine appointments at Chatty Kids are generally available in less than a week, and in some emergency cases, as soon as the same day, he said.

However, Salinas said the county never asked him to assess that capacity before deciding to close the Health Department clinic.

Instead, he said, county officials first met with him to establish a referral process for displaced patients on May 20, about two weeks after the closure announcement.

A week later, County Mayor Weston Wamp proposed allocating \$150,000 in the county's fiscal year 2027 budget, split evenly between Salinas' clinic and Cempa Community Care, a nonprofit community health center that opened a dental clinic for adults and kids about a half-mile from the Health Department on East Third Street in 2023. Commissioners ultimately approved the funding to support the transition of former Health Department patients to those providers.

For former patients

The Hamilton County Health Department said former dental patients who need help finding a new dentist or transferring their dental records and X-rays can call 423-209-8000.

(READ MORE: Hamilton County Commission denies \$250,000 allocation to Clínica Médicos)

Cempa CEO Shannon Burger said by email that her organization was consulted as the county began evaluating changes but was not part of a capacity assessment.

Cempa is taking new dental patients under 21, with average wait times around four weeks or less, and urgent needs being treated soonest, she said.

Because most children require multiple appointments each year, provider capacity depends on the number and complexity of visits – not simply the number of dentists on paper or patients referred, she said.

The county's 1,927 unique patients in the clinic's final fiscal year logged nearly 4,000 visits in that timeframe.

"No single provider can simply absorb the full patient volume," Burger said by email. "It will require collaboration among multiple providers and community partners."

Asked about the timeline of communications with the providers about referrals, and specifically whether county officials looped in Salinas before May 20, Haley Burton, a spokesperson for Wamp, issued a statement by email.

"Conversations between the Hamilton County Health Department, Cempa and other community health leaders about efficiency models and budgets have been ongoing for well over a year," the statement said.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

While financial sustainability is important, Chi said, it's only one measure of a public health program. Leaders also have to consider whether a community's dental needs are being met, he said.

"As much as I'd like to say that the private system should be able to take care of all of America's dental needs, the problem is that dental clinics are not distributed according to need," Chi said. "A lot of the highest need communities just don't have private practice dentists providing care in them, and so this is where community clinics or public health clinics really fill a gap."

Salinas said he did a demographic study when choosing his practice location on 23rd Street, across from the Montague Park soccer fields. The clinic sits in the heart of the neighborhoods where county dental patient zip code data show a majority of the former clinic's pediatric patients live, about 2 miles from the Health Department.

"This is exactly where I want to be," he said. "This is the population that needs it the most."

County officials said they referred patients to community providers, provided contact information for former patients seeking referrals and will transfer dental records to new providers upon request. They did not describe a process for determining whether former patients successfully established care elsewhere.

"I would be very concerned and interested in following up with that patient pool to make sure that everyone has a backup place to go," Chi said.

For families who spent decades returning to the same county clinic, that relationship now has to be rebuilt somewhere else, he said.

"Families over the 40 years have developed trust," he said. "You can't just hand that over to another clinic."

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