

SMILE Health

Category:

Best Incubator, Accelerator, Equity

Program/Fund Name:

SMILE Health

Corporate Name:

MATTER and CareQuest Innovation Partners

Date of Creation:

2022-05-10

Indications:

SMILE Health is an accelerator program supporting innovators who challenge norms and advance solutions improving accessibility, equity, and the integration between oral health and overall health. Now in its fourth year, SMILE Health connects diverse innovators with a network of 20+ mission-aligned industry partners, like Colgate-Palmolive, Cigna Healthcare, Henry Schein, PDS Health and more, to address critical gaps in oral and overall healthcare encompassing a broad spectrum of indications: from preventive care and early diagnostics to treatment modalities and improved patient engagement, particularly for underserved communities. We target systemic issues contributing to health disparities and support innovations that address the social determinants of health to help create a system that works better for all.

Therapeutic Areas:

While initially focused on oral health, SMILE Health's therapeutic scope has expanded to overall health integration. This includes preventative oral health and primary care, diagnosis and management of oral diseases, teledentistry, cancer screening and diagnosis, integrated medical-dental care models and solutions that improve access to care for vulnerable populations. The accelerator also examines how oral health innovation positively impacts chronic disease management and overall well-being, recognizing the significant connection between oral health and common, chronic conditions like diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and more.

FUND & SERVICE File Document upload:

History of the development of the fund / Incubators:

The critical need for transformative oral healthcare solutions is underscored by alarming statistics: over one in four U.S. adults (26 percent) suffer from untreated tooth decay, and children from low-income families are twice as likely to have untreated cavities. This widespread lack of access creates profound oral health disparities and systemic burdens, evidenced by over two million avoidable ER visits annually for dental conditions costing billions. These figures reveal a fundamental crisis: Despite the undeniable link between oral and overall systemic health, a critical and pervasive unmet need exists in the widespread lack of access to regular, high-quality oral healthcare, particularly for vulnerable and underserved populations impacted by significant social determinants of health.

To meet this urgent need, MATTER, the premier healthcare incubator and innovation hub, and CareQuest Innovation Partners, a company focused on validating and scaling solutions that improve the oral health of all, launched SMILE Health, a first-of-its-kind program designed to identify and accelerate early-stage startups at the intersection of oral health and overall health. CareQuest Innovation Partners is the for-profit subsidiary of CareQuest Institute for Oral Health.

Since its launch in 2022, SMILE has consistently grown the quality and quantity of its applicants, starting from five selected in 2022 to eight in 2025. Selected SMILE Health companies represent diverse solutions, from digital platforms to novel diagnostics, with a strong emphasis on equity. In 2025, nearly 100 applications were submitted from 15 different countries and 42 states, with 45 percent of founders identifying as racially or ethnically diverse and 47 percent gender diverse.

Some examples of SMILE Health alumni driving innovation in healthcare and life sciences include:

- Lura Health, a company driving innovation with a wearable health sensor that uses saliva instead of blood for continuous health monitoring.
- OraLiva, which provides rapid, non-invasive diagnostics for oral cancer - one of the deadliest and most costly cancers, largely due to late-stage diagnosis.
- Umayana, which helps prevent and treat severe cancer and acute wounds with its patented molecular compound and formulations, supporting cancer patients suffering from wounds like oral mucositis.

In 2024, SMILE Health's evolution included the launch of ACCELERATE, an exclusive funding opportunity specifically for SMILE Health alumni. ACCELERATE builds on the momentum from SMILE Health, providing startups and industry partners the opportunity to work together to further validate and scale solutions that fulfill critical needs in oral health and advance business priorities. To date, ACCELERATE has made

multiple investments, including Grin and OraLiva.

Now, as SMILE Health prepares to announce its fourth cohort for 2025, the accelerator continues to expand its reach and impact, consistently adapting its curriculum and partner network to address the most pressing challenges in oral healthcare and improve the human condition on a broad scale.

History of the development of the fund / Incubators:

N/A

HISTORY & FOCUS File Document upload:

N/A

How do you address your portfolio needs:

SMILE Health strategically addresses its portfolio needs by acting as a highly curated catalyst for innovation in oral health, ensuring a pipeline of impactful, mission-aligned solutions. This is achieved through a multi-faceted approach that provides tangible, invaluable benefits to participating startups far beyond just capital.

Startups join a four-month, semi-virtual program that offers a non-dilutive cash stipend, data-driven validation studies, one-on-one mentorship from industry experts, customized curriculum, dedicated pitch support, and warm connections to potential customers and investors. It aims to materially advance the startups' business by developing and advancing their solutions in the oral and integrated health markets.

A cornerstone of SMILE Health's approach is expert-led validation studies with some of the largest, most well-established companies in healthcare and oral health, including Colgate-Palmolive, Cigna Healthcare, Henry Schein, PDS Health and more. This allows them to rigorously test their hypotheses, refine their business models and establish product-market fit in real-world scenarios. This hands-on validation provides evidence of a solution's efficacy and market readiness, informing business strategy. Startups also have direct access to curated industry data, including CareQuest Innovation Partners' new Startup Data Hub with self-service capabilities, which provides access to medical and dental data, commercial and Medicaid - all for free, as well as consultative services for custom analytics.

Startups benefit from one-to-one mentorship with industry veterans who possess deep expertise in oral health, healthcare and entrepreneurship. This personalized guidance helps navigate challenges, refine strategies and foster critical connections. A custom curriculum of immersive workshops, tailored specifically for health innovators, equips them with essential business acumen, regulatory knowledge and strategies for scaling

within the complex healthcare landscape. SMILE culminates in a closed-door Reveal Day where startups share their learnings with potential investors and industry partners, and at HLTH, one of the industry's premier conferences.

Upon program completion, alumni gain ongoing access through a six-month MATTER membership, fostering continued growth, and can apply for ACCELERATE. ACCELERATE builds on the momentum from SMILE Health, providing startups and industry partners the opportunity to work together to further validate and scale solutions that address critical needs in oral health and advance business priorities. To date, more than a third of SMILE Health alumni have been accepted into ACCELERATE, including Grin and OraLiva.

Impact / Metrics to measure Success:

SMILE Health's success is measured both by its sustained, year-over-year growth in both the quality and quantity of companies in the accelerator, and the impact it has had on patients worldwide - particularly those in underserved communities.

SMILE Health's reach is global and continues to expand, with 2025 representing the largest cohort yet.

Stakeholder satisfaction and sustained engagement are also critical indications of success. SMILE startups and partners consistently report over 90 percent satisfaction with the program, speaking to the quality of the curriculum, mentorship and validation opportunities provided. Additionally, 100 percent of industry partners from the 2024 cohort are participating again this year, unequivocally underscoring their belief in SMILE Health's value proposition and its culture of innovation.

Finally, SMILE Health's success is rooted in its mission to increase equity and accessibility for all. SMILE Health alumni have impacted thousands of lives in critical ways like AI-based diagnostic testing for oral cancers, remote patient monitoring for rural or at-risk populations, AI telephonic enrollment agents to help families enroll in social and health programs, affordable dentures, culturally affirming health education programs, products to help cancer patients suffering from wounds like oral mucositis, and more.

Why your model is innovative, \and/or how it will improve the human condition:

SMILE Health's innovative model stands apart by focusing on a critically underserved area - oral health - and by uniquely addressing the perpetual challenge of product-market validation. While many accelerators claim to facilitate this, SMILE Health actually constructs real-world studies with industry-leading organizations,

providing an unparalleled level of true market validation. As Dr. Adam Schulhof, founder CEO of Grin, notes, \"SMILE Health opened the door to market opportunities we always knew would be a great fit for our technology but hadn't yet proven. Our industry partner provided insights to help us focus our strategy and care for chronically underserved patient populations. We are now able to operationalize this new market focus, deepen our relationships with industry partners, and quickly advance our business priorities.\"

The accelerator's strength lies in its impact partner model. Unlike typical programs, SMILE Health's partners (major players like Cigna Healthcare, Colgate-Palmolive and Henry Schein) aren't just mentors; they actively collaborate on rigorous validation studies. This isn't theoretical feedback; it's about putting solutions to the test within real operational environments, leveraging the partners' resources and data, including CareQuest Innovation Partners' new Startup Data Hub. This hands-on approach provides startups with evidence of their solution's efficacy and market demand. The consistent 100 percent re-engagement of 2024 industry partners for the 2025 cohort further validates the profound value they derive from this collaborative validation process.

Whether it's enabling earlier diagnostics for oral cancer, expanding teledentistry for underserved populations, or integrating oral health into chronic disease management, the program ensures that solutions are not only developed but also rigorously proven and prepared for real-world impact. This strategic validation enables a faster and more reliable pathway for impactful solutions to reach the millions who stand to benefit, ultimately enhancing overall health outcomes and reducing health disparities across diverse communities.

Please provide appropriate references (PubMed, Abstract, Website):

Please find below links to supplemental information that has informed this award application:

- MATTER: <https://matter.health/>
- SMILE Health (CareQuest Innovation Partners page):
<https://carequestinnovation.com/smile-health/>
- OraLiva Case Study: <https://carequestinnovation.com/smile-health/oraliva-case-study/>
- Grin Case Study: <https://carequestinnovation.com/smile-health/grin-case-study/>
- Accelerate Program for SMILE Health Alumni:
<https://matter.health/posts/carequest-innovation-partners-and-matter-announce-accelerate-exclusive-funding-opportunity-for-smile-alumni>
- Investment in Grin through Accelerate:
<https://carequestinnovation.com/carequest-innovation-partners-announces-investment-in-grin-a-smile-health-alumnus/>
- SMILE Health 2022 Program Launch:

<https://matter.health/posts/carequest-innovation-partners-and-matter-launch-smile-health-to-advance-innovation-for-accessible-equitable-and-integrated-oral-care>

- SMILE Health 2022 Cohort Details:

<https://matter.health/posts/carequest-innovation-partners-and-matter-announce-inaugural-cohort-for-smile-health>

- SMILE Health 2023 Program Launch:

<https://matter.health/posts/matter-and-carequest-innovation-partners-launch-second-edition-of-smile-health>

- SMILE Health 2023 Cohort Details:

<https://matter.health/posts/matter-and-carequest-innovation-partners-announce-second-cohort-for-smile-health-and-extensive-roster-of-industry-leading-partners>

- SMILE Health 2024 Program Launch:

<https://matter.health/posts/matter-and-carequest-innovation-partners-open-applications-for-smile-health>

- SMILE Health 2024 Cohort Details:

<https://matter.health/posts/carequest-innovation-partners-and-matter-announce-largest-cohort-of-startups-to-date-for-oral-health-accelerator-program>

- SMILE Health 2025 Program Launch:

<https://matter.health/posts/carequest-innovation-partners-and-matter-open-applications-for-smile-health-igniting-mission-driven-innovation-with-global-startups-industry-leaders-and-investors>

- SMILE Health at HLTH (CareQuest Innovation Partners):

<https://carequestinnovation.com/oral-health-at-hlth-now-more-than-ever-is-the-time-to-say-ahh/>