



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families

Children's Alliance launches new effort for oral health

Good oral health out of reach for too many Washington families

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2010 – The Children's Alliance is leading an effort for underserved families to gain greater access to oral health care in Washington state, through a new kind of oral health care professional called a dental therapist.

"Children's oral health, especially in the first few years of life, can determine their overall health," said Children's Alliance Deputy Director Jon Gould. "Too many kids are going without the basic treatment they need for healthy mouths. A new addition to the dental team is necessary: a professional who can meet kids where they are."

Dental disease is the single most common chronic childhood disease, affecting a child's school performance and self esteem and damaging their chances for success later in life.

Forty-five percent of our state's preschoolers enrolled in Head Start and Early Childhood Education and Assistance (ECEAP) programs in 2005 had experienced dental caries (cavities).

Preschoolers of color and their classmates from low-income families continue to cope with more cavities than white non-Hispanic children, according to a 2007 report by the state Department of Health. The report also noted that families in rural areas face barriers to accessing care. And 30 of 39 Washington counties do not have enough dental providers to serve the need.

Without access to a dental professional, kids can wind up in the hospital, undergoing procedures that cost \$3,500 to \$4,000 each. Oral health problems at a young age have long term health consequences: diabetes, heart disease and other chronic health problems start in the mouth, according to a 2000 report by the U.S. Surgeon General.

The problem doesn't stem primarily from a lack of health coverage. Although Apple Health for Kids covers dental services, 52 percent of enrolled children do not receive dental care.

"Our state has recognized that workforce shortages are a problem," said Gould. "Dental therapists -- a treatment provider that's well established and proven to be effective in 50 countries -- has long been studied as a possible solution."

Dental therapists work with dentists, hygienists and other oral health professionals to improve access to care, particularly for communities that find traditional dentistry practices out of reach. They receive over 3,000 hours of intensive training to provide preventive oral health care and commonly needed services, such as fillings and uncomplicated extractions. They work under the general supervision of an offsite dentist, who pre-approves the procedures they perform and reviews their work via phone, fax and Internet.

Though dental therapists have been at work in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and other countries for more than 80 years, Alaska is the only U.S. state with an active dental therapist program. An [independent study](#) released last month found that Alaska's dental therapists are completing a limited set of standard procedures on equal par with the work done by dentists.

"It is time now for more states to seriously consider new and proven approaches -- such as the dental therapist model -- as a way to bring critically needed oral health care services to vulnerable children and families," said Sterling K. Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "Oral health is essential to overall health, yet good, regular oral health care is out of reach for far too many people in this country."

Gould says a new kind of dental professional, like the dental therapist, is well worth considering.

"In a brutal economy, we need health care solutions that are affordable, pragmatic, and safeguard the health of Washington's kids," he said. "Dental therapists offer an innovative model. We'll be asking state officials to seriously consider them as a way to increase access to care for underserved children and adults. The cost to our children of not doing so is too high."

Children's Alliance is working with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as part of a larger movement nationwide to expand access to needed dental care to underserved communities. The Kellogg Foundation announced today that it will support efforts in Washington and four other states -- Kansas, Vermont, New Mexico and Ohio -- to expand access to oral health care through the use of dental therapists.

For more information about oral health disparities in Washington state, go to our web site, www.childrensalliance.org.

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