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Consumer Group Launches Initiative to Fill the Dental Provider Gap
W.K. Kellogg Foundation Provides Funding to Ohio and Four Other States to Pursue Dental Therapists as a Way to Increase Access to Dental Care

Columbus, OH—Dental Access Now, a coalition of consumer advocacy groups, announced today an initiative to educate the public about the lack of access to dental care and to pursue alternative providers as a way to expand access to sorely needed dental care in underserved communities. UHCAN Ohio will lead the effort to bring the innovative and proven effective dental therapy model to Ohio.

Ohio is part of a larger movement nationwide to expand access to needed dental care. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation announced today that it will support efforts in five states—Kansas, New Mexico, Ohio, Vermont, and Washington—to pursue the dental therapy model.

“Ohio’s urban and rural communities have traditionally been underserved by dentists and are being hard hit by the economic downturn and high unemployment rates,” said Cathy Levine, Executive Director, UHCAN Ohio. “Dental therapists provide an opportunity to address one piece of the puzzle to alleviate the oral health care crisis by expanding quality, affordable routine dental care.”

Dental care in Ohio is inaccessible and unaffordable for too many Ohioans, creating what amounts to an oral health crisis. Nearly one million Ohioans live in areas that have too few dentists to meet the need in the community and many more cannot afford oral health care. Ohio has 57 areas that have been federally designated as dental health professional shortage areas. Franklin County has two dental shortage areas and three federally qualified health clinics that have too few dentists to serve their patients.

“As a dental public health specialist, I fight for and stand up on behalf of children and families who want to be able to get their pain relieved and their disease prevented--the things that many of us don’t have to worry about,” said Dr. Larry Hill, a public health dentist. “Expanding the dental care team to include dental therapists will result in more preventive care and healthier communities.”

The lack of access to affordable providers is very personal for Raquel Rios, a young adult residing in Columbus, Ohio. Dental care was a luxury that her family could not afford and therefore Raquel went without routine cleanings and dentist visits most of her childhood. As a college student, when she needed dental care, she had to travel out of the country to find affordable dental care. As a young working adult, she still cannot afford the regular dental care that she needs.

“I am fortunate that I didn’t have more severe health issues as a result of not having access to dental care,” said Rios. “We need more dental providers who can offer routine check-ups at affordable prices and who are willing to treat low-income people especially in remote and underserved areas.”

The lack of dental practitioners and affordable dental care impacts people of all ages in Ohio. Consider the following:

- Three times as many Ohioans lack dental insurance as health insurance—an estimated 3.6 million people;
- 60 percent of Ohio seniors 65 and older are uninsured for dental care;
- About 40 percent of children, 30 percent of non-elderly adults, and only half of seniors enrolled in Medicaid saw a dentist in 2008;
- Half of Ohio adults had at least one tooth removed due to tooth decay or gum disease; 6 percent had all of their teeth removed; and
- 25 percent of 3rd graders have untreated cavities.

The dental shortage hits the most vulnerable the hardest. Only 50 percent of Black and Hispanic residents had a dental visit in the past year compared to 60% of non-Hispanic white Ohioans. Just over half of Ohioans living in the Appalachian region and only 60% of rural Ohioans had a dental visit in the past year. Dental care is one of the most needed services for people with disabilities.

“It is time now for Ohio and other states to consider new and proven approaches—such as the dental therapist model—as a way to bring critically needed oral health care services to vulnerable Ohioans,” said Levine. “Oral health is essential to overall health, yet quality, regular oral health care is out of reach for far too many Ohioans, especially our most vulnerable populations.”

Dental Access Now is a statewide coalition working to bring quality dental care to every community. It is a project of UHCAN Ohio in partnership with Community Catalyst and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. For more information go to <http://uhcanohio.org/content/about-dental-access-now>.

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