

Better Oral Health for Massachusetts

For immediate release

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New Statewide Coalition Forming to Address Oral Health Disparities

Initiative will kick-off with a June Summit

(Boston, MA) - Leading oral health advocates in Massachusetts are hosting a leadership summit , June 4 and 5 in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, with the goal of establishing a statewide coalition to address disparities in oral health care. The group seeks to produce an inclusive Oral Health Plan for Massachusetts aimed at eliminating barriers and increasing access to care for all Massachusetts residents. It is one of the first comprehensive state-wide initiatives to specifically focus on eliminating disparities in access to care.

Leading the effort are the Oral Health Foundation, Partners for a Healthier Community, Inc., Massachusetts Dental Society, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Massachusetts Dental Hygienists' Association, and Delta Dental of Massachusetts. The inaugural summit of the Better Oral Health for Massachusetts Coalition will be held June 4 and 5 at the Sturbridge Host Hotel and Convention Center in Sturbridge, MA.

The Summit follows the January 2008 release of the Catalyst Institute's "The Oral Health of Massachusetts Children," funded by Delta Dental of Massachusetts. The Catalyst Institute research revealed significant disparities in the status of children's oral health care among racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The study reported that Black third-grade students experience nearly three times the level of untreated dental disease as white third-graders, while third-grade students from low-income and Hispanic families are nearly twice as likely to have untreated dental caries as their white and higher income peers.

"Despite the fact that dental disease is almost entirely preventable, compelling evidence reminds us all that this is a serious problem for our children," said Dr. Robert Boose, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Dental Society. "We cannot ignore these numbers and must partner together to find a solution."

The Summit will advance the statewide agenda to address oral health disparities and will recognize many specific activities that promote oral health, prevent disease and ultimately close gaps in care for children, seniors, and other underserved populations. Summit sessions include best practices in community-based programs and strategies for developing a successful overall oral health plan.

“The state has shown some improvement overall since the last oral health survey in 2003; however, large numbers of children still have dental disease and these improvements are not reaching minority and low-income populations,” said Ralph Fuccillo, President of the Oral Health Foundation. “It is promising to see people come together to work on this issue. Eliminating these differences should be a statewide priority.”

The Better Oral Health for Massachusetts Coalition’s focus is aligned with the objectives of the Surgeon General’s National Call to Promote Oral Health as well as Healthy People 2010, a national set of objectives that grew out of a Surgeon General report.

“We know that community-based programs work and will be a focal point as we move forward,” said Dr. Frank Robinson, Executive Director of Partners for a Healthier Community. “Providing oral health services in schools and in neighborhood clinics expands access for the vulnerable populations who need it most.”

The Coalition will build on the work of several state initiatives, including the Special Legislative Commission on Oral Health, established in 2000 to study the oral health status, effective community prevention programs and access to dental services for residents. The legislation resulted in a course of action, however, the implementation of its recommendations has been deficient for low income residents, poor families and children and other vulnerable populations.

“We have a solid foundation from which we can build a powerful action plan,” said John Auerbach, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. “We have studied the issue and the special legislative commission furthered those efforts. Now we must take the next step and develop a strategy that not only will increase access but will eliminate disparities.”

After the conference, coalition sponsors will host working groups throughout the state to continue the initiative.

“Eliminating disparities is not something that any individual organization can accomplish alone,” said Barbara Dawidjan, RDH, MEd, President of the Massachusetts Dental Hygienists’ Association. “We are all dedicated to finding the solutions, and taking them into the communities where they will really make a difference.”

“Delta Dental of Massachusetts and our summit partners are committed to solving the problems outlined in the Catalyst Institute report,” said Fay Donohue, President and CEO of Delta Dental of Massachusetts. “We know what works in preventing oral health disease. Now we need to make sure that all children have access to preventive services and treatment.”

For more information about the Summit and the Better Oral Health for Massachusetts Coalition, please visit www.massoralhealth.org.

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