

2009 Washington Leadership Conference Improving Oral Health in America

While the majority of Americans have access to excellent and relatively affordable dental care (in 2007, for example, per capita dental costs were \$316, as opposed to per capita medical costs of \$5,496), too many low-income Americans still suffer needlessly from dental disease. This is unacceptable. Oral health is not elective; it is an integral component of overall health and well being. For too long, the dire unmet oral health needs of a growing number of Americans unable to access dental care have been ignored due to their economic status, geographic location or a myriad of other barriers to care. Medicaid promises "coverage" to millions of our neediest citizens—mostly children while inadequate funding betrays that promise. In many states, reimbursement lags so far below reasonable fees that dentists cannot afford to participate in Medi-caid without losing money on every procedure.

The ADA believes that a relatively small government investment in three areas can make a significant improvement in the oral health of Americans:

- 1) Mend the tattered Medicaid safety net by improving the dental Medicaid program.
- 2) Adequately fund proven oral disease prevention and wellness programs.
- 3) Rebuild the dental public health infrastructure, which includes recruiting and retaining dentists who are competent in public health practice.

Improving the Dental Medicaid Program

- Pass the **"Essential Oral Health Care Act of 2009" (H.R. 2220)**, which offers an enhanced federal match to states that change their pro-grams (such as establishing market-based fees and addressing administrative barriers) to ensure that individuals covered by a state's dental Medicaid plan have access to oral health care services to the same extent such services are available to the population of the state.
- Provide dental Medicaid coverage to all adults at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level.

Prevention and Wellness

- Enhance funding for proven and cost-effective community-based preventive initiatives, such as community water fluoridation and school-based screening and sealant programs.
- Increase oral health literacy efforts to ensure individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic oral health information and services in order to make appropriate health decisions.

Rebuild the Public Health Infrastructure

- Support advanced dental public health training and adequately fund dental public health positions at all levels of government.
- Provide financial incentives, such as student loan forgiveness, tax credits, funding for the National Health Service Corps loan repayment program or other subsidies that allow dentists to provide care in community-based or public health settings.

The American Dental Association urges Members of Congress to cosponsor the "Essential Oral Health Care Act" (H.R. 2220), and use any health care reform effort to improve America's oral health by investing in Medicaid, prevention and the public health infrastructure.

Questions can be directed to Judy Sherman, Director, Congressional Affairs, American Dental Association: 202-789-5164, shermanj@ada.org.