



Embargoed for Release

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**Special Report Highlights the Importance of
Dental Safety Net Providers in Rhode Island**

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**Providence, RI, June 29, 2006** – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will release a special report entitled *The Dental Safety Net in Rhode Island* at a policy forum with dental providers, state agencies and community leaders to be held at **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, Providence, RI, from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. on Thursday, June 29<sup>th</sup>.**

Dental safety net providers are the community health centers, hospital dental clinics and community-based programs that provide comprehensive, ongoing dental care – serving as the dental home for thousands of children, adults and the elderly. Along with private dentists and specialists, these dental safety net providers are a critical part of the dental care service delivery system in Rhode Island, especially for low-income and uninsured Rhode Islanders.

“Access to dental care is a major public health issue for children in Rhode Island. The state has been making progress towards improving access to care by working with private dentists and with safety net providers throughout the state. However, even with safety net providers seeing increasing numbers of children, adults and the elderly, fewer than half (44%) of the children enrolled in RIte Care last year were seen by a dentist. Private dentists and safety net providers must all increase their capacity to treat children and adults with Medicaid and those without dental insurance to ensure that everyone is able to access quality oral health services,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

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In September 2005, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT conducted a survey of the dental safety net providers in Rhode Island in order to better understand the delivery of dental services to Rhode Island's underserved children and adults. Fourteen of 16 providers responded to the survey, including: Bayside Family Healthcare (North Kingstown), Block Island Health Services (New Shoreham), Crossroads Rhode Island (Providence), East Bay Community Action Program (Newport), Northwest Health Center (Burrillville), Providence Community Health Centers (Providence), Thundermist Health Center (Wakefield), Thundermist Health Center (West Warwick), Thundermist Health Center (Woonsocket), Wood River Health Services (Hope Valley), Rhode Island Hospital's Joseph Samuels Dental Center (Providence), Fatima Health Center's Pediatric Dental Center (Pawtucket), St. Joseph Hospital's Pediatric Dental Center (Providence), and Community College of Rhode Island's Dental Hygiene Clinic (Lincoln). Blackstone Valley Community Health Care (Central Falls/Pawtucket) provided a partial response to the survey.

These dental centers provide oral health care to thousands of Rhode Islanders of all ages, regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay. The special report was released before an audience of policymakers and community leaders who are working to ensure that the dental safety net continues to provide access to dental care for children and adults who are uninsured, as well as those with Rite Care, Medical Assistance and private insurance. "The community health centers are excited about their increased dental capacity because the need is so great. The trend in 2006 continues to show them providing care to thousands of new patients," stated Kerrie Jones Clark, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Health Center Association.

The dental safety net providers are a critical component of the current and future health care delivery system in Rhode Island and continue to expand their services. In order to remain effective, it is critical that they have access to trained dental staff. "With our 75 year history of serving the public, we are continuing our academic mission by providing a rich learning environment for our new general practice dental residents, with the ultimate goal that they will choose to stay and practice in Rhode Island," stated Shirley Spater, DMD, MPH, Director of the Joseph Samuels Dental Center at Rhode Island Hospital.

The report also includes updates on survey respondents' staffing and services, as well as information on new dental services that will be instituted in Rhode Island in the next two years. Comprehensive Community Action Program is expected to open two dental centers, in Cranston and Warwick in late summer, 2006. Northwest Health Center also has announced plans to

open a community health center with four dental operatories in the town of Foster in the second half of 2007. The Molar Express, a Ronald McDonald Care Mobile, jointly operated by a collaborative of Comprehensive Community Action Program, East Bay Community Action Program, and Thundermist Health Center is planned to commence operations in September 2006. The Molar Express will serve children at more than 100 sites in 20 communities in Rhode Island.

**Key findings from the special report on dental safety net providers in Rhode Island include:**

**Services Offered:** The core set of dental services provided by dental safety net providers includes preventive care, diagnostic exams and x-rays, basic restorative care, and extractions. All dental services are offered on a daily weekday basis by all providers, for an average of 43 hours per week. While most dental safety net providers offer preventive and diagnostic services (such as exams and x-rays) and perform basic restorative care (such as fillings) and simple extractions, there is a need for specialty care for adults and even children. “We are proud to encourage regular preventive care by being the dental home for thousands of children. In addition, we provide a critical service for the children who need more complex treatment. Every week we have to extract teeth from toddlers and pre-schoolers in our operating room due to advanced dental disease,” said Christine Vallee, Administrator at St. Joseph Health Services.

**Patients and Populations Served:** All of the dental safety net providers reported serving patients who have no insurance, patients who have commercial dental insurance, and patients who have public insurance. Community health centers reported providing dental care to total 8,666 children and 12,362 adults in the most recent reporting year. Joseph Samuels Dental Center at Rhode Island Hospital, which specializes in treating children and adults with disabilities, provided dental care to 2,392 children and 1,333 adults. St. Joseph Health Services two dental centers (the Pediatric Dental Center in Providence and Fatima Health Center’s Pediatric Dental Center in Pawtucket), reported a total of 22,000 dental visits by children, with an average of 4 visits per child. The Dental Hygiene Clinic at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) saw more than 2,000 children and adults.

**Staffing:** Dental safety net providers reported employing a total of 25.53 full-time equivalent (FTE) dentists, 22.25 FTE dental hygienists and 35.45 FTE dental assistants, working in a total of 89 dental operatories (including 18 at CCRI). An additional 72 dental hygiene students (36 in

each of two years) provide dental hygiene service at the CCRI Dental Hygiene Clinic under the supervision of dental hygiene instructors. Seven respondents also report having staff vacancies, which can negatively impact on their ability to provide dental services to their patients.

**Financing:** Most safety net dental clinics reported an operating budget of under \$1 million dollars per year, derived from a combination of patient fees and reimbursement, grant funding, school board funding, volunteers/donations and state budget funding.

**School Linked Dental Programs:** Seven dental centers reported providing dental services in school settings during the 2004-2005 school year, encompassing 43 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 2 high schools in Rhode Island. Dental services offered in schools include oral screenings and exams, prophylaxis (cleanings), fluoride treatments, dental sealants and oral health education.

**Community Based Dental Programs:** Six respondents reported providing dental services in community settings, such as Early Head Start and Head Start Programs, child care centers, Boys and Girls Clubs and public housing developments. Dental services offered in community settings include oral screenings and exams, prophylaxes (cleanings), fluoride treatments, dental sealants and oral health education.

**Future Needs:** Most respondent dental organizations reported they were unable to meet all of their clients' oral health needs. Limited scope of services, inadequate number of specialists willing to accept referrals, and inadequate staffing levels were common barriers noted by respondents. In order to better meet their clients' needs, dental safety net providers indicated a need for more specialists willing to accept referrals, additional staff (including dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants, administrators/managers, and reception/clerical), increased staff language capacity, updated dental equipment, and increased funding, among other needs.

**The report included the following recommendations for dental safety net providers:**

- Dental safety net providers must commit to be participating providers in the RItE Smiles dental program for eligible children (under age 6) and to continue to provide dental services to uninsured children and adults and to children over the age of 6 and adults in the RItE Care, RItE Share, and Medicaid fee-for-service programs.

- Dental safety net providers must partner together and with other community agencies to develop strategies to prevent early childhood tooth decay and to develop additional “Providence Smiles-like” model programs to provide oral health education and access to dental care for children and their families.
- Dental safety net providers must pursue additional funding to expand dental services for uninsured and Medicaid insured patients in under-served communities, including nursing homes.
- Dental safety net providers must identify opportunities for workforce recruitment and retention to ensure appropriate staffing for their dental programs.
- Dental safety net providers must systematically collect utilization, staffing, and financing data in order to measure success, improve programs, identify areas for improvement, and inform policy change.

**The report also included the following recommendations for state agencies, public officials, foundations and charities, and oral health advocates in Rhode Island in order to support the dental safety net:**

- Continue to strengthen the infrastructure of these dental safety net providers by investing in capital needs for the maintenance and expansion of existing sites and building new dental centers in underserved communities.
- Ensure adequate reimbursement rates to support the increasing diversity of services provided in clinical and non-clinical settings.
- Address workforce recruitment and retention strategies so that there is an adequate supply of high quality dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistances working in dental safety net locations.

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**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT** is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, education, safety and development of Rhode Island children.