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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT releases new Issue Brief: Access to Oral Health Care for Children in Rhode Island

Over the past decade, Rhode Island has made progress in improving access to oral health care for children but more work needs to be done

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Expanding Rite Smiles and other initiatives are key to ensuring more and more children continue to receive preventive dental treatment

Providence, RI (September 12, 2011) – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released a new Issue Brief – *Access to Oral Health Care for Children in Rhode Island* – at a policy roundtable attended by health care providers, lawmakers and community leaders. The event was held on **Monday, September 12, 2011 from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station in Providence.** Speakers included Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Roberts, who is also Co-Chair of the Rhode Island Oral Health Commission, Martha Dellapenna, Oral Health Access Project Manager for the Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, and Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst and Rhode Island Oral Health Commission Co-Chair Jill Beckwith presented the findings.

“Oral health is an important component of overall health and well-being among children,” stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Poor oral health has been proven to have immediate and significant negative impacts on children’s general health, school attendance and academic achievement. That is why it is critical that we continue our work to expand access to dental care in Rhode Island.”

Oral Health Care among Rhode Island’s Children

According to a statewide oral health survey conducted by the Oral

Health Program at the Rhode Island Department of Health, dental decay was found to be a significant public health problem for Rhode Island's children, particularly those who are minority or live in low-income families. Of the third graders surveyed during the 2010-2011 school year, half (50%) had previous cavities and/or fillings. One out of four (26%) of the children surveyed had tooth decay that was untreated and needed dental treatment. Minority children and children in schools with higher free and reduced price school meal program eligibility status were twice as likely as their peers to have untreated tooth decay and five to six times more likely to have rampant decay (defined as more than six untreated decay or filled teeth) than their peers.

"It is always recommended that children see a dentist before their first birthday to be assessed for early tooth decay and to tailor future visits to the child's risk level," stated Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Roberts, who is also Co-Chair of Rhode Island's Oral Health Commission. "When a child is seen at an early age, dentists can begin preventive and restorative treatments right away, avoiding the need for more costly treatment or emergency treatment down the road."

Poor oral health during pregnancy has been shown to be a potential risk factor contributing to poor birth outcomes, including preterm birth and low birthweight infants. Good oral health during pregnancy can reduce the risk of gestational diabetes and preeclampsia for pregnant women. Approximately half (53%) of Rhode Island women report having a dental visit during their pregnancy. Prenatal care providers can play an important role in increasing the number of women who receive dental care during pregnancy.

Insurance Coverage Increases Access to Dental Care

Rhode Island has been making progress when it comes to insurance coverage for dental care. In 2008, 89% of children in Rhode Island had dental insurance that pays for routine dental (commercial insurance, direct pay or public coverage), up from 73% in 2001 and 62% in 1990.

"Insurance status is a strong factor in determining whether or not a child receives dental care," noted Jill Beckwith, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Co-Chair of the Rhode Island Oral Health Commission. "Dental insurance is still not available to many working families in our state. In 2009, half (52%) of Rhode Island employers reported offering dental insurance to full-time employees and 15% offered it to part-time employees."

Rlte Smiles: A Rhode Island Success Story for Children

There are currently two programs in Rhode Island that provide dental benefits to children enrolled in Medicaid, depending on their age. Children born on or after May 1, 2000, are enrolled in the Rlte Smiles managed care dental benefit program, while children born before May 1, 2000, receive their dental benefits under Fee-For-Service Medicaid dental coverage. Half (52%) of the children who were enrolled in either Rlte Smiles or Medicaid Fee-For-Service on June 30, 2010, received a dental service cleaning during State Fiscal Year 2010. According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Rhode Island ranks sixth best in the United States for the percentage of children under age 21 enrolled in Medicaid who received dental services in the Federal Fiscal Year 2008.

“In the past, children receiving Medicaid often had difficulty getting access to routine dental care, or any dental services at all,” said Steven Costantino, Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. “While children’s access to dental care is still a problem nationwide, we’ve made great strides in the five years that Rlte Smiles has been in place here in Rhode Island.”

Added Bryant, “In 2006, prior to the creation of Rlte Smiles, there were only 27 dental providers who offered dental care to children with Medicaid coverage. Now, there are 202 dentists in more than 380 locations throughout the state that are delivering dental services to children with Medicaid coverage. That’s an amazing testament to the success of the program.”

Rlte Smiles is one of several initiatives put into place in the mid-2000’s to increase access to oral health care among Rhode Island’s children. Other access initiatives include the expansion of school-based dental programs in core cities; the growth of two hospital-based dental residency programs; the increase in staff and dental operatories at safety net sites, and the implementation of a two-day “mini-residency” training program to help general dentists feel more comfortable treating young children.

The Dental Workforce in Rhode Island

An adequate workforce is critical to ensuring access to oral health care in Rhode Island, so increasing the number of dentists is vitally important. In 2010, there were 614 actively practicing licensed dentists in Rhode Island. Sixteen of Rhode Island’s 39 cities and towns are federally designated dental health professional shortage areas, based on an insufficient number of dentists to serve low-income or special populations. Also, a large number of Rhode Island dentists are nearing retirement age. As of December 2010, 44% of practicing dentists in Rhode Island were aged 55 years of older (16% were over age 65).

“Rhode Island must focus on developing ways to retain dental care providers already practicing in our state and to attract new providers,” said Roberts. “Expanding the dental workforce is a key way to increase access to dental care by children and families. Offering more in-state education and training programs helps our state recruit and retain dentists.”

Recommendations for Improving Access to Oral Health Care

There are several steps that can be taken to continue to improve access to oral health care for Rhode Island’s children. They include:

- Build on the success of RIte Smiles by increasing the age range of children who are eligible.
- Ensure that pediatric dental benefits are available through Medicaid and the Rhode Island Health Insurance Exchange (starting in 2014) at an affordable cost, in order to ensure that all children have insurance coverage for oral health services.
- Identify ways to involve primary care health providers in providing oral health assessment, referrals, and preventative measures for children and pregnant women.
- Implement workforce recruitment and retention strategies to ensure an adequate supply of high quality dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistants, especially those who will treat very young children and participate in RIte Smiles and Medicaid.
- Improve knowledge and eliminate barriers to access to care by families with young children.
- Continue to strengthen the infrastructure of dental safety net providers by investing in capital needs for the maintenance and expansion of existing sites and establishing new dental centers in underserved areas.

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