



Testimony Regarding House Bill 7879
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
April 23, 2008

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT offers its strong support for House Bill 7879, sponsored by Representative Handy, which would increase access to dental care for low-income children and elderly nursing home residents.

The RIte Smiles program (the oral health care coordinating program referred to in the bill) was launched in September 2006 for Medicaid-eligible children born after May 1, 2000. As of December 31, 2007, there were more than 35,000 children enrolled in RIte Smiles. We are approaching the date on which all Medicaid-eligible children 8 years old or younger will qualify for RIte Smiles and we believe that it is important the program's scope be increased to include older children as soon as possible. H7879 would allow children up to age 11 to be enrolled by January 1, 2009, which would build on the success of the RIte Care and RIte Smiles programs and serve to add oral health care to the aspects of primary care in which Rhode Island leads the country.

H 7879 also would incrementally increase access to dental care for the elderly residents of nursing homes. Because the General Assembly funded a modest portion of a similar bill in 2006, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services was able to move forward in identifying vendors to provide oral health solutions for nursing homes residents. However, the scope of the program is limited by a lack of funds for future years. We respectfully ask that this important program be supported through the passage of this year's bill.

We understand that this is a particularly difficult budget year. However, there has been so much work done in Rhode Island to prepare for this bill and such investments made by federal and state foundations, dental insurers and private and safety net dental providers that it would be a significant missed opportunity to let another year pass without taking action to solve these problems.

We believe that the state's investment would be wise because this bill will ensure that:

More children and elders will see a dentist for preventive care and treatment. While we are pleased that access to oral health care for children enrolled in Medical Assistance has grown over the past several years (nearly 8,000 more children received a dental service in 2007 than in 2003, a 22% increase), we are still only at the half-way point, with 50% of children enrolled in Medical Assistance having seen a dentist in the most recent year (2007). The data are similar for nursing home residents in Rhode Island; only one in three residents who have Medical Assistance are seen by a dentist each year.

If the age range for RIte Smiles is expanded, more private dentists will become "participating providers." We already have seen the positive impact that RIte Smiles' increased reimbursement rates have had on dentist participation – as of January 15, 2008 there were 207 dental providers participating in the RIte Smiles program, up from 90 when it began in September 2006 (and up from only two dozen or so under the Medicaid Fee

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
401/351-9400
401/351/1758

Testimony Regarding House Bill 7879
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
April 23, 2008
Page 2

For Service system prior to the implementation of RIte Smiles). During United Health Care Dental's (the RIte Smiles dental benefits manager) recruitment process to build its network, one of the reasons most often cited by dental providers for non-participation was the age range of the children eligible for RIte Smiles. Most dentists in Rhode Island are general practice dentists and they are most comfortable treating school aged children. More dentists have indicated that they would participate in RIte Smiles if older children were included in the RIte Smiles program.

The strain on the safety net dental provides will be reduced. The publicly funded "safety net" feels the effects of a private sector that is out of reach for children and elders. The hospital-based dental centers and Community Health Center dental centers in the state are having difficulty meeting the demands for dental care. Safety net providers don't want to turn away patients – but they simply do not have the staff time nor the equipment necessary to meet the needs for oral services.

Children and elders in Rhode Island will have better oral health. Tooth decay and gum disease are infectious, progressive, cumulative diseases that become more complex over time – and which are almost completely preventable. Many of Rhode Island's children and elders enjoy good oral health. Yet thousands suffer daily from pain and infection – which they could avoid with access to basic routine dental care.

You and your colleagues have shown admirable leadership when it comes to medical care in the RIte Care program. With your continued leadership, Rhode Island can lead the nation in improving oral health care for its children and elderly nursing home residents as well.

I respectfully request that you pass House Bill 7879 and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.