

Better Oral Health for Massachusetts

For immediate release
June 10, 2008

Contact:
Paul Jean/ Kristie DiSalvo
617-482-0042

Advocates Launch Effort to Create State Oral Health Plan to Improve Oral Health & Reduce Disparities

Summit in Sturbridge marks initial meeting to create the state's first plan to improve oral health

(Sturbridge, MA) – Leading oral health advocates in Massachusetts gathered in Sturbridge on June 4 and 5 to begin discussions on creating a comprehensive Oral Health Plan for Massachusetts aimed at eliminating barriers and increasing access to care for all Massachusetts residents. The two-day conference was attended by more than 200 dentists, dental hygienists, physicians, lawmakers, state oral health officials, insurers and a wide array of health advocates and policy leaders.

Ralph Fuccillo, President of the Oral Health Foundation and one of the principal conveners of the summit, said, “We could not have been more pleased with the results of the summit. We now have a commitment by all the major stakeholders to work together in forging a plan that will address inequities in access to dental care and improve systems for delivering care to people at risk of developing dental disease.”

“All participants,” Fuccillo continued, “agreed that oral health is a vital part of overall health and that improving the oral health of Massachusetts residents is a shared responsibility requiring systemic change in the way we deliver oral health services.”

“The state of Massachusetts had made important strides in enhancing access to oral healthcare, including restoration of dental benefits for adult Medicaid recipients and strengthening the Office of Oral Health,” stated State Senator Harriette Chandler, a co-chair with representative John Scibak of the legislature’s Oral Health Caucus. “Still more needs to be done to address dental workforce shortages and other barriers to care.”

The major sponsors of the summit were 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.

“What was most promising,” said Dr. Robert Boose, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Dental Society, “is that we agreed on a set of principles to guide the development of the plan going forward.”

Those principles state that the Oral Health Plan for Massachusetts should be inclusive of all major stakeholders; establish clearly defined goals, target populations and priorities for action; draw upon the best scientific evidence and best practices from other states; define measurable objectives and timelines for achieving them; and establish clear lines of accountability.

Participants also agreed that any plan would require the establishment of a statewide surveillance system for monitoring the progress on achieving the plan's objectives for improving the oral health of all Massachusetts residents.

"We have a significant advantage in that we don't need to reinvent the wheel in creating this plan," said Dr. Frank Robinson, Executive Director of Partners for a Healthier Community. "We will learn from the best practices of other communities and states in developing community-based programs and other strategies for expanding access to care for the most vulnerable populations."

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.

"While dental disease can have very serious consequences for the health and well being of children and adults," said Fay Donohue, President and CEO of Delta Dental of Massachusetts, "it is also almost entirely preventable. With a comprehensive state action plan, I am confident we can eradicate most of this disease."

The state has submitted an application to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) State-Based Oral Disease Prevention Program. This program provides funding to states to build capacity and infrastructure to plan, implement, and evaluate oral disease prevention and health promotion programs. Lynn Bethel, Director of the Office of Oral Health in the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, indicated that she expects the CDC to make a decision on funding grants within the next month.

The summit occurred at the Sturbridge Host Hotel and Convention Center in Sturbridge, MA.

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

###