

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Dental Coverage Does Not Always Lead to Dental Care

Delta Dental and American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Working to Fill Coverage Gap

OAK BROOK, Ill (July 19, 2010) – Ten years after the Surgeon General’s Report on Oral Health in America, some things have gotten better for children and some things have gotten worse. Nearly 70 percent of community water systems are fluoridated compared to 65 percent in 2000; the percentage of children benefiting from sealants appears to have increased; more dental clinics are available through Community Health Centers; and, thanks to Medicaid, State Children’s Health Insurance Programs (SCHIP) and health care reform, by the year 2014, access to dental coverage for children will be nearly universal.

Still, experience has shown that coverage does not always translate to care. At a time when the percentage of low-income children with dental coverage increased from 18 percent to 41 percent, dental visits by children under the age of six increased from 21 percent to only 25 percent.ⁱ Additionally, the prevalence of dental caries (tooth decay) in primary teeth of children aged two-to-four years increased from 18 percent in 1988-1994 to 24 percent in 1999-2004.ⁱⁱ Sadly, widespread disparities by income, race and ethnicity persist and are likely to increase during trying economic times.

So, while expanded access to dental coverage is something to celebrate, the job of linking covered children to dental care will remain a challenge. Thankfully, steps are being taken to help make this access a reality.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) is partnering with Head Start at the national, regional, state and local levels to develop a national network of dentists to link Head

Start Children with dental homes. Head Start programs, which serve approximately one million low income children annually, are required to work with parents to make sure that enrolled children have a dental home, obtain dental examinations and receive recommended preventive and restorative services.

To help Head Start accomplish the goal of placing children with a dentist who can care for them in a comprehensive and continuous way, the AAPD is working with regional consultants and state-level leaders to form a national network of pediatric dentists and general dentists to: provide quality dental homes for Head Start and Early Head Start children; train teams of dentists and Head Start personnel in optimal oral health care practices; and assist Head Start programs in obtaining comprehensive services to meet the full range of Head Start children's oral health needs. The partnership also provides parents, caregivers and Head Start staff with the latest evidence-based information on how they can help prevent tooth decay and establish a foundation for a lifetime of oral health.

The Delta Dental Plans Association and its member companies, providing dental coverage to more than 54 million Americans, is also partnering with Head Start to help meet the oral health needs of children. For the past two years, Delta Dental has provided Cavity-Free Kids training at the National Head Start Association's annual teacher's meeting. These "train-the-trainer" sessions were designed to send Head Start professionals back to their communities armed with proven educational materials created specifically for them. Delta Dental companies also support Head Start at the state-level throughout the country through grants, educational training and direct dental care.

Additionally, in 2009, Delta Dental companies donated more than \$40 million to support safety net programs such as mobile dental units that visit schools in underserved areas, school-based dental clinics and sealant programs, charity dental clinics, Give Kids a Smile programs, and programs aimed at increasing the supply of dentists through school loan repayment programs and dental school scholarships.

"Access may always be an issue," said Chris Pyle, director of public relations for the Delta Dental Plans Association. "While Delta Dental is committed to helping make access to care possible, we are also committed to educating kids and parents so that they can prevent problems that result from poor oral health habits," Pyle said.

"While health care reform will mean new coverage options for children, if historical trends continue, we know that access to care for the poor will remain a challenge. That's why Delta Dental remains committed to supporting programs that link children – and adults – to the care they need," said Pyle.

The not-for-profit Delta Dental Plans Association (www.deltadental.com) based in Oak Brook, Ill., is the leading national network of independent dental service corporations specializing in providing dental benefits programs to more than 54 million Americans in more than 93,000 employee groups throughout the country.

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ⁱ Edelman BL, Chinn CH. Update on disparities in oral health and access to dental care for America's children. *Academic Pediatrics* 2009;9:415-419

ⁱⁱ *Academic Pediatrics* 2009;9:388-95