

Oral Health and Dental Access in Champaign County: A Report by Champaign County Health Care Consumers

February 2007

Overview of This Report

The Champaign County Health Care Consumers (CCHCC) is a grassroots citizen action organization founded in 1977, dedicated to the mission of health care for all and ensuring that consumers have a voice in the health care system.

Since the 1980s, CCHCC has initiated and led Champaign County's efforts to expand access to dental care for low-income children and adults (including Medicaid beneficiaries) in Champaign County. CCHCC's efforts have resulted in the creation of several dental access programs, including the CCHCC Dental Referral Program and the Child Dental Access Program provided through the Champaign County Board of Health.

The purpose of this report is to provide national and local perspectives and data on oral health and, in particular, the need to expand dental access for low-income adults (including Medicaid beneficiaries) in Champaign County. This report also provides a brief review of community activities and efforts to address oral health and dental access in Champaign County.

Oral Health and Dental Access – The National Perspective

The U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health

In May 2000, the U.S. Surgeon General released the government's first comprehensive report on oral health. It showed that Americans' teeth and mouths are in the best shape ever, but with many poor people and racial groups having untreated oral diseases, serious disparities in oral health exist.

This is not surprising considering that an estimated 108 million Americans, including 26 million children have no dental insurance. *According to U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, those who suffer the worst oral health are found among the poor of all ages, with poor children and poor older Americans particularly vulnerable.*

These disparities amount to "a silent epidemic of oral diseases" among the nation's most vulnerable citizens.

** "Oral health ailments – cavities, cancer, gum disease, tooth loss, oral-craniofacial injuries and birth defects – afflict more Americans than any other cluster of health problems." *Source: Keep America Smiling: Oral Health in America* report by Oral Health America, 2003.

The Link Between Oral Health And Other Diseases

- Calling the mouth a mirror for many diseases, Satcher also highlighted surprising links between oral health and general well being. For instance chronic oral infections are associated

with diabetes, heart disease, pneumonia, stroke, and pre-term, low birth weight babies. Oral diseases can also be a sign of HIV infection as well as osteoporosis.

Oral Health and Adults

- For every adult that lacks medical coverage, three are without dental coverage.
- “Poor oral health is a significant health problem for young people attempting to enlist in military service. The armed forces are spending a disproportionate share of medical resources to treat the dental problems of new recruits before they can be deployed.” *Source: Keep America Smiling: Oral Health in America* report by Oral Health America, 2003.

Oral Health in Seniors and People with Disabilities

- Nearly one-third of people 65 years of age and older have untreated dental caries. (Center for Disease Control: Aging Trends). This statistic is indicative of problems in access to dental care for seniors.
- Medicare provides no dental coverage for older Americans or people with disabilities.
- People with disabilities are at greater risk for oral diseases and are less likely to be treated.

Children’s Oral Health and Access to Dental Care

- With regard to uninsured children, a study presented at the Families USA conference in January 2001 revealed that more than 70% of parents of uninsured children report that the lack of access to dental care and dental coverage is a greater problem than access to medical care (see 1/31/01 New York Times article).
- “Diseases of the mouth remain our number one chronic childhood disease,” according to the *Keep America Smiling: Oral Health in America* report by Oral Health America, 2003.

The Link Between Adults’ and Children’s Access to Dental Care and Oral Health

- A parent’s lack of access to health care appears to be a more important barrier to care for the child than lack of insurance, as demonstrated by several large studies. *Source: Institute of Medicine (IOM), Insuring Health: Health Insurance Is a Family Matter, 2002.*
- Parents in poorer physical health (including oral health) and mental health have greater difficulty fulfilling their parental roles and responsibilities than do healthy parents. *Source: Institute of Medicine (IOM), Insuring Health: Health Insurance Is a Family Matter, 2002.*
- If parents use health care, their children are more likely to use health care as well. Parents who have experienced access problems may have less confidence in obtaining care for their children. *Source: Institute of Medicine (IOM), Insuring Health: Health Insurance Is a Family Matter, 2002.*

National Models for Addressing Oral Health Needs

- Several key organizations and programs have established models for improving oral health and showing that better, more cost-effective primary care and preventive health services can be provided by involving communities, integrating dental services into overall health care,

and/or utilizing effective delivery systems. *Source: 2003 Keep America Smiling: Oral Health in America* report by Oral Health America.

Oral Health and Dental Access – The Local Perspective

Symptoms of this oral epidemic are easy to find in Champaign County, where there is a serious lack of affordable dental services – *especially for low-income adults and adults with Medicaid*. This problem is made worse because there is virtually no affordable access to oral surgeons or specialists such as endodontists. Even those who qualify for public aid find that the limited number of local dentists accepting Medicaid is a barrier to care.

This problem of dental access for low-income and working families and individuals, and for people with Medicaid has been well-documented and is well-known in our community. Seniors and people with disabilities are included among those in our community who suffer from lack of access to dental care.

Lack of Affordable Dental Care for Champaign County Residents

Calls to the Champaign County Health Care Consumers (CCHCC) Hotline show that there is a serious lack of affordable dental services for low-income individuals and families in Champaign County. Access to affordable dental care affects a large portion of Champaign County residents, including the low-income uninsured and underinsured consumers (very few health insurance or HMO policies cover dental care), as well as those with Medicaid. The lack of affordable dental care for Champaign County adults, in particular (significant improvements have been made in children's dental access), is a health care crisis in this community. The health disparities which the U.S. Surgeon General's report documents exist in Champaign County.

Champaign County Demographic Data

- Champaign County's population: 186,800
- Percent of County's population with Medicaid: 11.4%
- Medicaid persons in Champaign County: 20,449 (*Source: Local DHS Office, June 2005*)
- Medicaid children in Champaign County: 11,754
- Medicaid persons in Group Care in Champaign County: 561
- Number of uninsured, non-elderly in Champaign County: 54,990 (29% of population) (*Source: The Uninsured in the 15th Congressional District of Illinois, a report by the Campaign for Better Health Care with data from Families USA, February 2006*)

Overwhelming Number of Callers to CCHCC's Consumer Health Hotline Seek Dental Care

CCHCC operates a Consumer Health Hotline, which is a service to assist consumers who are having any kind of problem with the health care system. Most of the calls CCHCC receives each month are from consumers seeking access to affordable health care. *CCHCC receives over 400 calls per month, and on average, over half of those calls are from consumers seeking access to affordable dental care or dental providers who will accept Medicaid.*

The Oral Health Crisis Is Evident In Visits to Hospitals' Emergency Departments

Champaign County's two hospitals, Provena Covenant Medical Center and Carle Foundation Hospital, both treat hundreds of patients every year for oral health problems – namely abscesses (infections) – through their Emergency Departments (EDs). Both hospitals provided CCHCC with data on oral health outpatient ED visits for the calendar year 2005.

Provena Covenant Medical Center – Oral Health Outpatient Visits to ED

- Total number of cases in 2005: 771
- Average number of cases per month: 64.25
- Total cost for 2005: \$368,103 (in charges)
- Average cost per case: \$477.43
- Breakout by payor:
 - Cash; no insurance: 277 (35.9% of total)
 - IPA (Medicaid): 295 (38.2% of total)
 - All others: 199 (25.8% of total)

Carle Foundation Hospital – Oral Health Outpatient Visits to ED

- Total number of cases in 2005: 1,022
- Average number of cases per month: 85.2
- Total cost for 2005: \$150,758 (in cost, not charges)
- Average cost per case: \$148 (cost to hospital; charges to patient are higher)
- Breakout by payor:
 - Cash; no insurance: 338 (33% of total)
 - IPA (Medicaid): 424 (41% of total)
 - All others: 260 (25.4% of total)

Data from both hospitals indicate that, by far, the three top diagnoses for outpatient oral health visits to the ED are for periapical abscess (infection that has spread from the tooth to the surrounding tissues, including bone), dental caries, and non-specific dental disorders.

People should not be getting their oral health care through the ED but that is exactly what they are having to do – these are primarily people who lack access to affordable dental care, and do not know where to turn for help and therefore delay treatment until they are in great pain. People with broken or crushed teeth, infected mouths, seeking dental care and seeking relief from pain go to the only place where they know they will be seen and from which they cannot be turned away – the ED. *Most of the people with dental problems who go to the ED or are referred to CCHCC are people with dental problems that could have been prevented years ago with basic oral health care – preventive care, restorative care including treatment of cavities, etc.* -- but instead have gone untreated and have blossomed into devastating and painful health conditions that will also require greater expense to treat.

These patients typically need antibiotics and pain medications, which CCHCC helps them get, but then they have to start on the long road of seeking affordable dental care to take care of the problem once and for all. It can be months before they get the care they need, and so they

are forced to “manage” their dental problem by seeking more antibiotics and pain medications through the ER, where they also incur significant medical costs. Treatment at the ER for oral health problems typically results in hospital bills to the patient of approximately \$400 to \$800, in addition to the costs of getting prescriptions filled.

Many of the clients CCHCC sees who are in this situation are people who are in incredible pain, and who are sometimes even emaciated from their incapacity to eat and from stomach problems resulting from pain and infection as a result of the oral health problem. Some clients lose their jobs as a result of sick days from the pain or from spending too much time in the ED trying to seek relief and treatment.

The Dental Referral Program

CCHCC coordinates the only affordable dental care program for low-income adults in Champaign County, called the Dental Referral Program (DRP). Every day, CCHCC receives calls from consumers seeking to enroll in the DRP, or seeking affordable dental care, including oral surgery, dentures, child dental care, and other oral health services.

Through the Dental Referral Program (DRP), local dentists agree to provide discounted dental services to adults in Champaign County who do not have dental insurance and cannot afford needed dental care. In order to qualify for the program, individuals must reside in Champaign County and live in households with incomes below 185% of the poverty level. Patients must pay \$15 for their initial appointment. Then, based on income level, they receive a 20%, 40%, or 60% discount on the dentist’s services for all follow up work. CCHCC administers the program, provides the financial screening, and qualifies the applicant. In addition, CCHCC provides written and verbal reminders to clients to ensure that they keep their appointments.

Currently, the DRP is considered the primary source for dental assistance for low-income adults in the community. Unfortunately, the DRP is very limited. Even for patients that meet DRP qualifications, there are barriers to receiving all the care they need. For instance, many patients are in need of lab work or the services of a specialist like an oral surgeon. Patients must pay full price for these services that are not directly provided by DRP participating dentists. Also, when major dental work is needed, patients often find themselves unable to afford the portion of costs that they are responsible for paying.

Local Efforts to Prioritize and Improve Dental Access

The Champaign County Health Care Consumers (CCHCC) and many other local social service organizations have identified and prioritized dental access as a major problem to be addressed in our community. The problem of dental access for low-income and working families and individuals, and for people with Medicaid has been well-documented and is well-known in our community. The recent community-based efforts to understand and begin addressing this problem began in earnest in 2001. The following public and community efforts and events indicate the community’s awareness of, and willingness to address the problem of dental access:

- CCHCC and local dentists initiate the only affordable dental care program for low-income adults in Champaign County, called the Dental Referral Program (DRP).

Through the Dental Referral Program (DRP), local dentists agree to provide discounted dental services to adults in Champaign County who do not have dental insurance and cannot afford needed dental care. (1992)

- CCHCC releases report titled “Champaign County – A Community at Risk: Health Care Out of Reach,” in which we described the problems of access to health care in our community and dedicated a section to discussing the problem of dental access for low-income, uninsured, underinsured, and Medicaid and KidCare persons in our county. (April 2001)
- The Champaign County Community Health Partnership is formed, with over 50 local organizations participating, including health care providers, social service providers, labor groups, consumer health advocates, faith-based organizations, and others. The Community Health Partnership (CHP) undertakes process to prioritize community health concerns. Dental Access is one of the community health priorities identified, and the CHP Dental Access Work Group is formed. (Spring 2001)
- A community meeting for residents of East Central Illinois is held to discuss local oral health care problems and to recommend solutions to the state. Officials from the Illinois Department of Public Health are present, as well as Rep. Tom Berns, and a staff member of Rep. Rick Winkel’s office. Approximately 100 community members attend meeting and provide testimony regarding problem of dental access. (June 26, 2001)
- CCHCC, the CHP Dental Access Work Group, the Friends of Public Health coalition and the Human Services Council of Champaign County all prioritize dental access for Champaign County children and take their message to the Champaign County Board of Health, which governs the Champaign County Public Health Department. The Board of Health and the County Board agree to allocate funds for a “children’s dental access program” to be implemented through the County Public Health Department. (November 2001)
- CCHCC and the CHP Dental Access Work Group hold a public study session on dental access programs around the country and use the information gathered to help inform how the County Public Health Department’s children dental access program might best be structured to meet the local needs of county residents. (January 2002)
- The Champaign County Health Department’s Child Dental Access Program is implemented, and Lisa Bell, a dental hygienist, is hired as coordinator of that program. Ms. Bell recruits dentists to participate in collaborative program, and county children begin receiving free dental services. A Dental Advisory Committee is created to help support and guide the development of the new

program. Several members of the Dental Access Work Group serve on the Dental Advisory Committee. (Spring/Summer 2002)

- CCHCC (and the Dental Access Work Group), WILL-AM Radio, and WBCP Radio join together in the Sound Partners-funded effort to create the SmileHealthy! program – a collaborative effort to educate the Champaign County community about oral health and dental access and to address, through community-initiative, the problems of oral health and dental access. (Summer/Fall 2002)
- The State of Illinois partners with local organizations to host a community meeting on Oral Health in order to help the State develop its 5-Year Oral Health Care Plan. The meeting is sponsored by the Illinois Department of Public Health's Oral Health Division, Champaign County Health Care Consumers, Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, Health Care Justice Campaign, I-Floss Coalition, Illinois Rural Health Association, and the Central Illinois Dental and Education Services organizations. The State of Illinois plans to release its new 5-year plan early in 2007. (July 24, 2006)

For more information, please contact:

Claudia Lennhoff, Executive Director
Champaign County Health Care Consumers
44 E. Main Street, Suite 208 Champaign, IL 61820
Tel.: 217-352-6533 Fax: 217-352-9745
E-mail: claudia@shout.net or cchcc@healthcareconsumers.org
Web: www.healthcareconsumers.org