

Building Better Oral Health: *A Dental Home for All Texans*



A SUMMARY OF THE REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE TEXAS DENTAL ASSOCIATION WINTER 2008



Each year, employed adults lose an estimated 164 million hours of work due to oral health problems or dental visits, while children with oral disease miss over 51 million hours of school.

SOURCE: *Oral Health in America: A Report of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2000*

CAN TEXAS AFFORD NOT TO CARE ABOUT ORAL HEALTH?

In an effort to begin a constructive dialogue about improving the oral health of all Texans, the Texas Dental Association (TDA), with grant funding from the American Dental Association (ADA), commissioned an independent third-party report on the issue of access to oral health care in Texas. **The report, “Building Better Oral Health: A Dental Home for All Texans,” examines:**

- The medical, social and economic consequences of untreated oral disease in Texas,
- The oral health status of Texans compared to the rest of the nation,
- Texas’ current oral health care delivery system, including charitable care programs,
- Populations with the greatest need for oral health care services, and
- Best practice case studies from other states for expanding access to oral health care.

Texas can and should do a better job of improving access to oral health care, especially for the state’s most vulnerable residents.

REPORT FINDINGS

Poor oral health affects more than just the mouth. It can compromise a person's general health, quality of life and life expectancy. It can also wreak economic havoc — keeping children out of school and adults home from work — and drive up health care costs in general.

Charitable care is a vital component of the overall distribution of oral health care in Texas, but it is part of a safety net, rather than a strategy for increasing access to regular oral health care.

Too many of the state's young, sick, poor and elderly are falling through the cracks. These Texans are at higher risk of developing serious dental diseases, many of which could have been prevented with proper oral healthcare both at home and in the clinical setting.

The changing demographics of Texas demand a new, more aggressive state strategy to improve access to oral health care. Although Texas has made some positive strides in improving the state's oral health, the State cannot afford to rest until all Texans have access to a dental home.

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

“Building Better Oral Health” proposes five distinct **policy recommendations** to expand access to oral health care in Texas. The recommendations are long-term solutions that cannot be achieved overnight. They will take time and resources to implement effectively.

- 1. Identify a “dental home” for every Texan.** Start by committing to find a dental home for the state's youngest children first (ages 1 to 5).
- 2. Strengthen the Department of State Health Services Oral Health Program.** Make sure that the Oral Health Program has the financial and human resources it needs to successfully lead Texas' efforts to improve the oral health of its citizens.
- 3. Create new programs to encourage dentists to practice in underserved areas and treat underserved populations.** Provide dentists up to \$100,000 in repayment assistance in return for three years of service in an underserved area providing a minimum level of service to Medicaid recipients.
- 4. Develop a comprehensive oral health public awareness and education campaign.** Conduct market research to better understand existing public attitudes, beliefs and behaviors about oral health care.
- 5. Expand access to oral health services for older Texans.** Implement Senate Bill 34, which requires the State of Texas to provide certain annual preventive dental services to Medicaid nursing home residents. The bill passed in 2001, but was never funded.

“...Oral health is essential to general health and well-being at every stage of life.”

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

The State of Texas is in an unprecedented position to take decisive actions to build better oral health.

Complying with the historic Frew v. Hawkins agreement (which allocated \$1.8 billion—including \$707 million in state revenues—to expand access to children’s Medicaid services for the 2008-09 biennium) is a key priority. In addition, there are other important ways that Texas policymakers can improve access to oral health care, especially for the state’s most vulnerable residents.

As the face of Texas continues to change, the state must begin to put in place a new, more aggressive strategy to improve access to oral health care. This challenge must be approached as a shared responsibility — among dentists, allied health professionals, primary care providers, policymakers, community-based organizations, parents and schools. The job is too big—and important—for any one group to try to tackle alone.

To download a complete copy of the report, “Building Better Oral Health: A Dental Home for All Texans,” or for more information, please go to www.buildingbetteroralhealth.com

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