

September 10, 2015

Mr. Pedro Nava
Chairman, Little Hoover Commission
925 L Street, Suite 805
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Nava:

Children Now has been in the vanguard of California health advocates calling for reform of the Medi-Cal Dental Program, better known as Denti-Cal. Children Now has collaborated with other stakeholders and the Medi-Cal Dental Program itself to:

- Assist public health sites providing free care to begin to bill Denti-Cal;
- Establish a medical-dental collaboration pilot in Los Angeles County to help primary care providers make better informed, more strategic dental referrals to young Medi-Cal beneficiaries (project overview attached); and
- Work within the Los Angeles Prepaid Health Plan Stakeholder process to ensure that Medi-Cal Dental Managed Care in Los Angeles County is held accountable.

Our work with the First Five Association to identify barriers to public health sites' ability and interest to bill Denti-Cal is especially relevant to the Commission's investigation. For example, First 5 San Mateo concluded that billing Denti-Cal cost more in administrative time than the actual reimbursement rate would cover, making "charity care" paid by First 5 the de facto option.

California should explore how to emulate and further expand successful state Medicaid dental programs with a track record of bringing more care to children. In Washington, for example, the Access to Baby and Child Dentistry (ABCD) program provides care to Medicaid-enrolled children ages zero to six through a community-based program that gives enhanced reimbursement rates and training to dentists. A similar program called Healthy Kids, Healthy Teeth exists in Alameda County and provides enhanced reimbursement rates using county dollars. Such targeted investments could help produce better outcomes for beneficiaries.

Additionally, with implementation of State Plan Amendment 15-005 allowing the enrollment of Registered Dental Hygienists (RDHs), and Registered Dental Hygienists in Extended Functions (RDHEFs) into the Medi-Cal Dental Program as providers,¹ we hope that the Little Hoover Commission study will contain recommendations on how to improve the program so that these new positions will also be attracted to serve and thus help to increase the number of available providers who can serve eligible children.

As shared above, Children Now has several ideas to help improve the Denti-Cal program, and is involved in several initiatives and stakeholder processes working to address the problems that the Little Hoover Commission might also uncover. For example, we are on both the California Oral Health Advisory Committee convened by the California Department of Public Health and the recently formed Medi-Cal Dental Services Division (MDSD) Workgroup. Children Now is also part of the state leadership team helping MDSD implement the Statewide Pediatric Oral Health Action Plan as called for by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to achieve two goals related to pediatric oral health, specifically preventive services and application of dental sealants.

¹ If the RDH or RDHEF is employed by: (1) a public health program created by Federal, State, or local law; or (2) a public health program managed by a Federal, State, county, or local governmental entity.

We look forward to attending the public hearing on Thursday, September 24 to share our thoughts and to working with you and the Commission to assist this work. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 510-763-2444, x114 or via email, eespejo@childrennow.org.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Eileen Espejo".

Eileen Espejo
Senior Managing Director, Media & Health Policy

Improving Low-Income Children's Oral Health Care Access in Los Angeles County through Medical-Dental Collaboration

With funding from the DentaQuest Foundation and First 5 LA, Children Now is leading a pilot project to advance oral health care guidance and referral-delivery by pediatric primary care providers (PCPs). The project promotes completion of preventive dental visits with dental providers by children under 6 years of age who reside in Los Angeles County, are served by Medi-Cal, and have not had a dental visit in the past 12 months.

Background

Dental caries is the most common, yet preventable, chronic disease of childhood, disproportionately affecting children from low-income families and racial/ethnic minority groups.ⁱ If left unchecked, it can cause pain, infection, and tooth loss. Studies also show connections between oral health problems and systemic health concerns, such as cardiovascular disease. Associated discomfort and toothaches experienced by children with caries contribute to eating and sleeping dysfunctions, impaired growth, weight loss, and missed school days.

Although dental care is a fully covered EPSDT benefit, only 50% of Medi-Cal eligible children in Los Angeles County ages 0-20, and 44% of children under age 6, had a dental visit in FY 2010-11.ⁱⁱ

PCPs are uniquely positioned to advance oral health. Interacting with a much larger percentage of infants and toddlers, and with greater frequency, than do dentists,ⁱⁱⁱ PCPs have greater access to perform oral health screenings, and are likely to be viewed as a credible source of guidance around recommended dental visits.

Promoting Dental Referrals at the Primary Care Site: The Model

Children Now worked with the three Medi-Cal-contracted dental managed care plans and the Denti-Cal program to identify Medi-Cal-enrolled children in the target population who have not had a dental visit in the past 12 months (i.e., “non-utilizing children”). The California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) helped the team to identify the health plan that serves each non-utilizing child, and those plans then identified the pediatric PCP to which each non-utilizing child is assigned. Together with Children Now, the plans and DHCS determined PCP practices with large numbers of non-utilizing children, suggesting systems-based opportunities for improvement.

Practices participating in the pilot have received tools and guidance (including lists of non-utilizing children at their practice, dental provider referral lists, and referral forms) to educate and provide dental appointment referrals to parents of non-utilizing children during well visits. The project team will track improvements in preventive dental service utilization among children in the target age group who are served by these practices.

About Children Now

Children Now is a nonpartisan, multi-issue research, policy development, and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting children's health and education in California and creating national media policies that support child development.

Contact: Eileen Espejo, Director, Media & Health Policy, Children Now, at eespejo@childrennow.org, or (510) 763-2444, x 114.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (October 2004). Guide to Children's Dental Care in Medicaid.

ⁱⁱ Department of Health Care Services, Dental Comparison of Sacramento and Los Angeles Counties, Medi-Cal and Fee-For-Service Utilization Rates by Age Group and Plan FY10-11, 4-27-12.

ⁱⁱⁱ K.M. Pierce, R.G. Rozier, and W.F. Vann, Jr. “Accuracy of Pediatric Primary Care Providers' Screening and Referral for Early Childhood Caries.” *Pediatrics*, 2002;109:e82.