

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.

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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.