



Access to Dental

ISSUE BRIEF 3

This issue brief is the third in a series developed by Early Childhood Iowa – Quality Services and Programs Component Group. The issue brief is developed to inform policy makers about the importance of dental care access.

Dental Home

The Oral Health Bureau within the Iowa Department of Public Health supports the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry definition of a dental home. A dental home provides an opportunity to implement preventive dental health habits that meet unique needs and keeps children free from dental disease. The dental home is one that can provide the following:

- Acute care and preventive services
- Assessment of oral diseases
- Individualized preventive care based on risk assessment
- Anticipatory guidance about growth and development
- A plan for dental trauma
- Information about proper care of teeth and gums
- Nutrition education
- Referrals to a dental specialist when the general dentist cannot provide care

Obstacles to Establishing a Dental Home

Despite historic achievements in oral health, such as community water fluoridation and other preventive measures (e.g. sealants, fluoride varnish), children in Iowa, especially those from low-income families, are still without basic dental care. Current obstacles in Iowa include:

- In FY05' only 44.3% of Medicaid enrolled children received a dental service.
- According to the 2006 survey of 3rd graders, 13.2% of the children have untreated decay. For low-income children, this number is even higher at 18.3%.
- There are an insufficient number of practicing dentists in Iowa, particularly in lower-income and rural parts of the state. Seventy-nine counties are estimated to be designated dental shortage areas in 2006.
- The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends children first see the dentist at the age of one; however, majority of general practice dentists are uncomfortable or unwilling to see children under age three.
- Dentists are reluctant to accept Medicaid-enrolled patients due to low reimbursement and poor dental appointment compliance issues.

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Dental Home Development System Building Activities

To fully develop a system of promotion, education, and prevention for the purposes of establishing a dental home, the following activities are recommended:

- **Improve the dental support system for families**
 - Integrate oral health services into the local public health systems
 - Implement a statewide oral health surveillance system
 - Create training programs and mandatory continuing education courses for dental and other healthcare providers regarding children's oral health
- **Improve the dental Medicaid program**
 - Contract with a familiar dental insurance carrier to improve dentist participation in Medicaid
 - Create a dental screening code and specific reimbursement for physicians
 - Allow reimbursement for oral screening and fluoride application by non-dental providers
- **Implement recruitment and retention strategies for underserved areas**
 - Create a dentist/dental hygienist student-loan repayment program to increase the dental workforce in shortage areas
- **Integrate dental services into rural and critical access hospitals**
 - Work with Iowa's hospital systems to develop primary care dental clinics in rural acute-care hospitals

Summary

Iowa needs to develop an integrated and coordinated oral health service delivery system in order to help families obtain dental homes. This system needs to include:

- Oral health promotions
- Education
- Prevention
- Hospital primary care dental integration
- Multiple providers to screen, prevent disease, and make referrals to dentists
- Maximized efficiency of the available workforce

Ultimately, at risk children who are currently excluded from the dental care delivery system will be reached and will have a dental home.

***For more information related to dental access issues in Iowa, please contact Bob Russell, state dental director, at (515)-281-4916 or brussell@idph.state.ia.us.**