

UNPRECEDENTED NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS INEQUITIES IN DENTAL CARE IN ILLINOIS

Poor and rural populations—and especially children—suffering from lack of access to critically needed care

Chicago, December 2, 2016--Poor oral health is one of the most pressing, unmet health care issues facing Illinois children and adults today according to a new state oral health assessment report *Oral Health in Illinois*, the first comprehensive statewide oral health assessment ever completed. Tooth decay, dubbed “America’s silent epidemic” by the U.S. Surgeon General, disproportionately affects poor and rural residents of the state according to the findings released by the report sponsors the Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation, Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation and Michael Reese Health Trust.

The report finds that untreated cavities and other oral health problems are prevalent among children in Illinois, particularly for those living in poverty and rural areas. One third of children in rural areas have untreated tooth decay. Illinois children living in poverty are five times more likely to have fair or poor oral health. And just over half (55 percent) of children on Medicaid even saw a dentist in the previous year.

“Far too many children in Illinois don’t receive the dental care they need,” said Heather Alderman, president of the Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation. “Untreated tooth decay can affect children’s diet, sleep and ability to learn. This situation is unconscionable when you consider how treatable and preventable these diseases are.”

Oral health disease is one of the most prevalent yet preventable chronic health problems Americans face. Medical professionals agree that good oral health is critical to overall health and well-being. Adults with untreated cavities face the same issues as children, as well as risk tooth loss that can impact the ability to talk, eat, show emotion and earn a living.

“Oral health plays an integral role in overall health,” said Lora Vitek, director of philanthropy and community relations for Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation. “Increasing access to dental care and educating Illinoisans about the importance of oral health are key to advancing the overall health of all Illinoisans. With this first of its kind state oral health assessment, we are able to see these disparities more clearly, which will lead to positive change in our community and help further our mission of improving oral health in the state.”

The report found that 2.48 million adults in Illinois have untreated tooth decay, putting them at risk for tooth loss. A full 25 percent of low-income seniors in Illinois have no remaining teeth.

A shortage of dental health providers and insufficient Medicaid reimbursement rates were identified as significant contributors to the access problem in our state.

Illinois has the fourth lowest Medicaid reimbursement rate in the nation for pediatric dental care. And the state is dead last in reimbursement for adult treatments.

Low reimbursement rates drive down provider participation in Medicaid. In fact, in 44 of 102 counties in Illinois, there is only one or no registered Medicaid dental provider.

“Given the importance of oral health, we are hoping that the findings of this report help policymakers see the real challenges our state faces,” said Gayla Brockman, President and CEO of the Michael Reese Health Trust. “We need to make policy changes that will improve access to oral health treatment, especially for our severely underserved low-income and rural populations.”

Among the challenges is a persistent shortage of oral health professionals in many rural areas, especially southern Illinois. Millions of Illinoisans live in dental health shortage areas, and many more live in areas without access to any specialty dental providers.

The report’s sponsors are unveiling a new website, oralhealthillinois.org, to document their findings and raise awareness about oral health challenges in Illinois.

The *Oral Health in Illinois* report is the result of research conducted by the Sinai Urban Health Institute, the research arm of Sinai Health System, and Rob Paral & Associates.

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About Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation

The Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation was formed in March 2008 by Delta Dental of Illinois, a not-for-profit dental service corporation with a mission to improve the oral health of the communities it serves. Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation is the 501(c)(3) charitable arm of Delta Dental of Illinois and works to support and improve the oral health of people in Illinois. In the past decade, combined efforts of Delta Dental of Illinois and Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation have provided more than \$3 million to programs and organizations in Illinois that improve the oral health of the residents of Illinois.

About Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation

The Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation (ILCHF) has a single vision: to ensure every child in Illinois has the opportunity to grow up healthy. Working through grantee partners across the state, the Foundation focuses its grant making on identifying and funding solutions to the barriers that prevent children from accessing the ongoing health care they need.

About Michael Reese Health Trust

The Michael Reese Health Trust seeks to improve the health of people in Chicago's metropolitan communities through effective grant making in health care, health education, and health research. The Trust will focus a portion of its funding on Jewish institutions and issues to fulfill the 110-year legacy of Michael Reese Hospital, founded and supported primarily by the Jewish community. The Trust, in fulfilling its Jewish responsibilities to participate in the arena of general community needs and problem solving, will strive to serve the health care needs of vulnerable and underserved Chicagoans of all races and ethnic origins.