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## **Nearly Two Million Working Families in Illinois Shortchanged on Basic Dental Care** **'Bridge to Healthy Smiles' Coalition Launches Statewide Campaign to Close Dental Care Gap**

Springfield, Ill. (March 12, 2008) – A crisis exists for the hundreds of thousands of Illinois families who rely on government-funded programs for their health care needs. These programs, such as Kidcare, All Kids, Family Care and Medicaid, are grossly under funded. In fact reimbursement rates in Illinois are among the lowest in the nation.

The Bridge to Healthy Smiles coalition today is holding a 10 a.m. news conference at the Illinois State Capitol press room to launch a statewide campaign dedicated to bringing equitable and affordable dental care to all Illinoisans. The heart of the issue is the lack of access to dental care in rural and parts of urban Illinois. According to the *Agency for Health care Research and Quality*, 26 percent of poor or near-poor families see dentists annually compared to 40 percent of middle-income families and 54 percent of high-income families nationally.

“We are asking Illinois legislators to take important steps to close the dental care gap,” said Dr. Keith Dickey, president of the Illinois State Dental Society. “It’s alarming to know that 40 percent of all Illinois counties do not have access to dental care. We are committed to making family oral health care a priority for those who need it most.”

To fill this dental care gap in Illinois, a comprehensive three-point plan is being announced today. The plan encourages:

- Raising the Medicaid reimbursement for dental care;
- Opening 10 dental clinics by 2010 throughout Illinois to reach people in need; and,
- Encouraging new dentists to practice in underserved areas by forgiving a portion of their dental school loans.

“Too often, the parents of children who rely on public healthcare have a difficult time finding a dentist leaving kids in pain and unable to succeed in school. The passage of Bridge to Healthy Smiles legislation is critical to bringing much needed dental care to underserved areas in Illinois,” explains Robyn Gabel, executive director of the Illinois Maternal & Child Health Coalition.

“This is a serious public health issue,” said Dr. Sheila R. Brown, executive director of Lincoln Dental Society. “There is an undeniable link between general health and oral health care. It’s time to stop penalizing working-poor families in urban and rural Illinois and begin offering equal access to dental care for all.”



To learn more about the Bridge to Healthy Smiles Coalition's three-point legislative campaign including current legislation, a map of the 48 underserved areas in Illinois and a chart comparing national dental reimbursement rates visit [www.BridgeToHealthySmiles.com](http://www.BridgeToHealthySmiles.com).

***About Bridge To Healthy Smiles Coalition***

The Bridge to Healthy Smiles campaign is led by a diverse coalition working to improve oral health across the state. Coalition members include:

- Illinois State Dental Society, representing more than 6,300 dentists, dental hygienists, dental lab technicians and dental students;
- Lincoln Dental Society, an Illinois-based organization representing African-American dentists;
- Hispanic Dental Association, dental professionals dedicated to promoting and improving the oral health of the Hispanic community and providing advocacy for Hispanic oral health professionals; and,
- Illinois Maternal and Child Health Coalition, recognizing that healthy infants, children, mothers and families constitute the basis of our society. IMCHC is dedicated to promoting and improving their health and well being through advocacy, education, community empowerment and policy development.

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