

Bridge to Healthy Smiles Campaign Resumes

Posted: 2/11/2009

The Illinois State Dental Society resumed its aggressive public advocacy campaign with the spring legislative session. The three-point legislative campaign and awareness initiative is dedicated to making dental care more accessible and affordable for all Illinoisans.

Specifically, the legislative package would increase Medicaid reimbursement levels, increase the number of dental clinics around the state, and provide loan repayment incentives to encourage new dental graduates to provide care in underserved areas.

In Illinois, access to dental care for low income and the working poor has become a very serious issue primarily due to low Medicaid reimbursement levels. In fact, Illinois has one of the lowest reimbursement rates in the country for most services. "The 12 most commonly performed procedures are reimbursed at only 46% on average. Yet the minimum level of reimbursement for all covered services should be at least 64% of the median fee charged by dentists, which would at least cover the dentist's costs. This bill would mandate that dentists be reimbursed at the minimum level of 64%," explained ISDS Director of Government Relations Dave Marsh.

Moreover, that minor change in reimbursement levels could have a potentially huge impact on dentists' participation in the program. Estimates indicate that such a modest increase in fees could result in 900 new dentists participating in the Medicaid program.

Dentists are not looking to make a profit from this program. They simply want to cover the costs of providing care for this population without having to raise their fees to other patients that have private insurance or pay cash. It is not fair to expect private pay patients to pay more because the state is not fulfilling its responsibilities to provide proper dental care to children and families.

What's more, based on recent survey results, it is estimated that Illinois dentists gave away upwards of \$70 million in totally free care to those in need. "Dentists clearly are doing their part to ease the access to care situation, but they cannot do it alone," added Mr. Marsh.

The second legislative initiative would increase the number of local health department dental clinics. Public health clinics located throughout the state offer a low-cost treatment option for many needy patients. In addition, these centers provide an excellent training ground for young dentists seeking to gain greater patient experience. However, the high patient demand on these facilities in combination with the increasing cost of routine care has flooded clinics with more patients than they can treat. Worse yet, limited public funding and continued budget cuts threaten their survival.

ISDS proposed legislation would appropriate \$2 million to establish 10 local health department dental clinics in 10 counties. As an added incentive, another measure would

offer property tax reductions for those building new dental facilities, such as dental clinics.

The third legislative initiative would appropriate \$250,000 in student loan incentives to encourage young dentists to pursue their careers in underserved areas. Although Illinois has a sufficient number of practicing dentists, the distribution is inequitable. Two out of three dentists practice in the Chicago area. Consequently, in rural downstate locations, patients may be several miles from the nearest dentist or dental clinic. Furthermore, there is no incentive for dentists to practice in underserved rural and urban areas where there typically are more Medicaid patients.

Moreover, dental school graduates are saddled with a huge amount of school debt upon entering practice, about \$160,000 on average. The grant program would provide \$25,000 in loan forgiveness annually for up to four years for dentists who graduated from either dental school in Illinois, establish practices in rural areas, and simply enroll in the Medicaid program..

ISDS is also recommending that dentists participating in the Children's Health Insurance Program Act, All Kids Health Insurance Act, and /or Public Aid programs be given the option of participating in the State Employee Deferred Compensation Plan, rather than receiving direct payment for dental care provided. "This would be an incentive aimed at helping young dentists to begin saving for retirement early on," noted Mr. Marsh.

Watch *Illinois Dental News* for more information about the program in the weeks ahead, and visit www.bridgetohealthysmiles.com for information on contacting your legislators and other opportunities to become involved in these critical legislative initiatives.