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Maryland Announces Launch of First Statewide Oral Health Literacy Campaign

“Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids” Aims to Help Medicaid-Eligible Children Access Dental Care

Baltimore, MD (March 23, 2012) – Tooth decay is the single most common childhood disease nationwide, yet it is completely preventable. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this problem is nearly three times as prevalent among underserved children.¹ While Maryland is considered a national leader in addressing children’s dental health needs, too many children eligible for dental care through the state’s Medicaid program still have not accessed dental care services.

Delaying or skipping dental treatment, or not incorporating proper oral hygiene and dietary practices, can increase a child’s chances for pediatric oral disease, which can lead to serious long-term repercussions including malnourishment, learning delays, behavioral problems, or in extreme cases—death.²

To stem the dangerous risks associated with childhood oral disease, today the Maryland Dental Action Coalition (MDAC), supported by a strategic alliance with the Maryland Office of Oral Health, announced the launch of the “Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids” campaign targeting pregnant women and children from birth to 6 years old.

“In 2007, 12 year-old Deamonte Driver tragically died from an untreated tooth infection,” said Anthony G. Brown, Maryland Lt. Governor and Chair of the Maryland Health Quality and Cost Council. “Since then, Maryland has been committed to improving pediatric oral healthcare for all children — especially those who are underserved. ‘Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids’ is one more important resource to help inform families in need about potentially life-saving dental care.”

U.S. Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), whose proposal³ created a Department of Health and Human Services' website to help parents find a local dentist, noted: "There can be no health without oral health care and this new program will provide resources to help parents better understand how to care for their children's dental needs, including locating dentists who accept Medicaid. It is one way that we're working to ensure that all children have access to oral health care. We must make sure that what happened to Deamonte Driver never happens again."

Lt. Governor Brown, Senator Cardin, U.S. Congressman Elijah Cummings and other health care and government officials came together at the Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry to announce the launch of the "Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids" awareness campaign and underscore their support for this important issue. Free dental screenings were provided to preschoolers from Union Baptist Head Start daycare, and free oral health education materials were distributed to all.

"Both federal and state leaders have worked together to ensure that Deamonte Driver's death would not be in vain," said Congressman Cummings. "Through the involvement of all of these stakeholders, I believe this campaign will help to prevent oral disease and educate the public about how to best access the care. I am proud to support the campaign."

Baltimore mother Vanessa Pearl spoke at the launch announcement about her own experience with her 4-year-old son, Marcus. While at The Ark in Baltimore, a local preschool for homeless children, Pearl and her son accessed a free dental screening program – an opportunity that would not have been available prior to the Driver tragedy. Through that screening, Pearl learned Marcus had several cavities that, if left untreated, may have threatened his health. "It's hard to take your kids to the dentist when you have limited resources. But with programs like these, you can keep your child healthy and get him the care that he needs."

Harry Goodman, DMD, MPH, MDAC board member and Director of the Office of Oral Health at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) added, "We need to do a better job communicating to parents about how important oral health is to overall health. All too often, families don't place a lot of emphasis on oral health, unless there's an emergency. They also do

not realize that they should start bringing their kids in to see a dentist by no later than their first birthday. That surprises a lot of people, but tooth decay is an infectious, yet preventable disease that often starts during infancy.”

About Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids

“Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids” will target parents and caregivers of these youngsters through a comprehensive literacy campaign utilizing outreach through community organizations such as federally qualified health centers; local health departments; Women, Infants and Children (WIC) programs; Head Start; television, radio, online and public transit ads.

The campaign website – www.HealthyTeethHealthyKids.org – launched today and provides extensive information and tips to drive awareness for critical stages of pediatric oral health care. Tips include: 1) if you are a mom-to-be, visit the dentist during your pregnancy because the health of your mouth can affect your unborn child; 2) take your child to the dentist by age one, and 3) brush your child’s teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.

The “Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids” campaign’s free hotline (1-855-45-TEETH), available in English and Spanish, starting the week of March 26 provides residents with the convenience of speaking with a person who can answer oral health questions, or get them help finding a dentist. The program’s educational brochures will also be available at community centers and health care facilities around the state.

About the Maryland Dental Action Coalition

MDAC is an independent, broad-based statewide coalition of individuals and organizations dedicated to improving the oral health of all Marylanders through increased prevention, education, advocacy, and access to oral health care. For more information, about MDAC visit: www.mdac.us

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¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/stratplan/plan4.htm>

² Nelson WI, Ed. Textbook of Pediatrics. 15th ed. Philadelphia, Pa: WB Saunders; 1996: 628

³ The 2009 reauthorization of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) included several of Senator Cardin’s proposals.