

State Oral Health Improvement Plan for Disadvantaged Floridians

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

You must have good oral health to be healthy! Even though safe and effective ways exist to maintain oral health, many Americans still suffer the needless pain and complications of dental diseases that affect their overall health and well-being. Oral diseases create financial and social costs that diminish quality of life and burden society. Good oral health for all is dependent on equal access to community and school-based preventive and educational programs, routine, periodic professional care, and proper daily home care. Increased awareness is needed for the public and policymakers to better understand that good oral health is essential for overall health and is achievable for all.

The 2000 Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health in America made it clear that there are inequities and disparities affecting the very people who are least able to access the resources to attain optimal oral health. Today, our most vulnerable citizens – the poor and uneducated, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly and the disabled – suffer the bulk of dental diseases.

The reasons for disparities in oral health are various and complex. Socioeconomic factors, a lack of community infrastructure and programs, workforce issues, physical and mental impairments, behavioral and psychosocial factors, funding issues, a lack of awareness concerning oral health, the perception that oral health is not important, and many other factors act as barriers to providing and attaining optimal oral health care. The existence of these health disparities demonstrates either a lack of awareness or worse, a societal tolerance – a lack of urgency to act. Currently a combination of individual, professional and community efforts focus on improving oral health so that everyone's teeth can last for a lifetime, but resources are limited and efforts are fragmented.

THE OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE PLAN

The objective of the State Oral Health Improvement Plan is to establish common goals among stakeholders that promote action, increase awareness, encourage collaboration and communication and result in unified efforts to reduce oral health disparities. A single resource is needed that provides readily accessible and comprehensive information to educate the public and policymakers about the oral health status and problems of disadvantaged Floridians, that suggests solutions to address these problems, and that provides information on current initiatives.

A broad-based team with members representing individuals and organizations from the health professions, government agencies, academia, private industry, foundations, and consumer and advocacy groups reviewed published scientific literature and relied upon the expertise of team members in compiling documents used in developing the State Oral Health Improvement Plan. The documents include background reports that compare the state of oral health in Florida with national data, previous and current efforts to address oral health issues in Florida, and potential strategies to consider with analyses of the benefits, barriers, impact and feasibility of each strategy.



DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Improve access to community and school-based prevention programs for all ages by increasing community water fluoridation and school-based, sealant, fluoride mouthrinse, and fluoride varnish programs.

2. Improve access to community and school-based education programs for children and adults by increasing the training and utilization of school health providers and educators, by increasing the use of appropriate grade level curricula, and by increasing community education programs.

3. Increase public and governmental awareness of oral health issues to promote action by developing programs to educate the public, lawmakers, policymakers and non-dental health care providers through workgroups, forums and the establishment of a statewide independent oral health coalition.

4. Improve state and county-based oral health data collection and research by developing an oral health disease-based data collection system, annual county-specific oral health profiles, annual analyses of Medicaid and KidCare dental programs, and a state oral health research agenda.

5. Improve access to care by assuring a highly trained, diverse, appropriately allocated dental workforce exists that consists of an adequate number and diversity of dental care provider types, that is trained to treat special needs populations, and that maximizes the use of volunteers and the current workforce.

6. Improve access to care by assuring adequate statewide, publicly focused infrastructure and support programs exists by improving and expanding current safety-net programs, expanding access to special needs care, promoting case management and continuity of care, increasing awareness of existing care sources, removing barriers to dental provider participation, and exploring the benefits of teledentistry and the collocation of service.

7. Improve the integration of oral health prevention and education into general health by increasing the awareness of the relationships of oral health and systemic diseases, increasing oral health training for medical professionals, and increasing the utilization of medical personnel for screening and referral.

CONCLUSIONS

Most dental diseases are preventable; good oral health is achievable for everyone. However, past efforts to improve the oral health of disadvantaged persons in Florida have been fragmented. The State Oral Health Improvement Plan for Disadvantaged Floridians provides a foundation to address the oral health disparities of disadvantaged Floridians in an effective, unified, cooperative, broad-based collaborative effort among private health care professionals, the public, academia, advocacy groups and government.

