

Dental Public Health Activity Descriptive Summary

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Development of a State Oral Health Plan

“We will start with a framework.” Those words became the inspiration for a group of individuals to produce a state oral health plan designed to convey the vision for the oral and overall health and well-being of the citizens of the state of Alabama. A very simple 6-word sentence that ideally should have transformed into a finished product – and that it did. Already acknowledging the need for a plan, Alabama’s 50th place ranking in the 2016 **“Oral Health America: A State of Decay”** publication provided the impetus for its development. The ranking was greatly attributable to the lack of a state oral health plan.

On November 9, 2017, an Oral Health Coalition of Alabama (OHCA) workgroup met in Birmingham, Alabama. The purpose of the meeting was to conceptualize the “framework” for the State Oral Health Plan (SOHP) for Alabama. The final product being designed would act to serve as the benchmark for the 5-year timespan 2018-2023. The workgroup consisted of representatives from Alabama Medicaid, the Alabama Dental Association (ALDA), the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry (UABSOD), CHIP/ALL Kids, the Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, federally qualified health centers, special needs populations, older adults, Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) office staff, and other stakeholders.

Upon completion of the initial framework, input from ancillary sources resulted in numerous revisions and ultimately, the final plan. Far from a static document, as additional statistics and data become available the plan will be reevaluated so as to allow the S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timed) Objectives to be modified accordingly. While the Oral Health Office of ADPH assumes lead role in managing and reporting progress and changes to the plan, OHCA serves as the place of central coordination and communication. The success of the plan requires fulfillment of specific goals by the respective organizations (i.e., ADPH, ALDA, UABSOD, various stakeholders, etc.) for implementation as well as to realize and perpetuate the plan’s goals.

The collaborative effort of a much-appreciated multitude of entities has resulted in Alabama’s first comprehensive state oral health plan bringing with it a sense of great accomplishment and great promise.

In the year 2000, the Surgeon General’s Report acknowledged the fact that oral health plays an integral part in the overall general health and well-being of all Americans. For the first time, the significance of oral health and its effect on the entire body was brought to the forefront. The oral cavity became referred to as the “gateway of the body,” sensing and responding to the external world and at the same time reflecting upon what is happening deep inside the body. This validation of the importance of oral health gave way to major findings:

- Oral diseases and disorders in and of themselves affect health and well-being through life.
- There are safe and effective measures to prevent the most common dental diseases— dental caries and periodontal diseases.
- Lifestyle behaviors that affect general health such as tobacco use, excessive alcohol

use, and poor dietary choices affect oral and craniofacial health as well.

- There are profound and consequential oral health disparities within the American population.
- More information is needed to improve America's oral health and eliminate health disparities.
- The mouth reflects general health and well-being.
- Oral diseases and conditions are associated with other health problems.
- Scientific research is key to further reduction in the burden of diseases and disorders that affect the face, mouth, and teeth.

Armed with this knowledge, the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) and the Oral Health Coalition of Alabama (OHCA) collaborated, along with numerous stakeholders, to devise a plan that would help achieve optimal oral health for the citizens of Alabama. The plan necessitated recognition that certain disparities created barriers hampering particular segments of the population from attaining the goals set forth. Socioeconomics, ethnicity, race, disabilities, age, location, pregnancy—these were disparities of great concern when considering the plan and its implementation. With those in mind, it was decided that Alabama's State Oral Health Plan should focus on these specific goals:

- 1) Increase Access to Oral Health Care**
- 2) Professional Education and Integration**
- 3) Health Literacy**
- 4) Data and Surveillance**
- 5) Prevention**

By utilizing the collective data contained within this plan, the ultimate goal of optimal oral health can be achieved. It is a template to help navigate and overcome the myriad of disparities that present themselves to countless citizens of the state of Alabama. It is the path to the gateway of both oral and overall health.

Under the leadership of a new State Dental Director, on April 17, 2018, Alabama gained national recognition by moving 21 spots to its present ranking of 29 in the latest "**Oral Health America: A State of Decay**" publication. In the featured article, *Alabama's Big Leap In 2018 State Rankings*, the presence of a state oral health plan was cited as one of the most contributing factors in Alabama's climb.

Lessons Learned:

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