

Dental Public Health Activity Descriptive Summary

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Statutory Mandate for State Oral Health Program

The Arkansas Office of Oral Health has had many ups and downs in its four-decade history. With changes in administrations and state health officers, the program has had strong, limited or no support depending on priorities within state agencies. Following the retirement of the previous state dental director in 1997, the position was vacant for almost two years. Maintenance of a state oral health program is often dependent on current policy makers at the state level. Without a legislative mandate, oral health programs are often on the cutting block in hard economic times. With a mandate, legislators and state health officials have more reason to maintain the oral health program and to give it the support required for success. A coalition of supporters (included the state dental association, the state dental hygiene association, the primary care association and Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families) donated time, efforts and expertise in the development of a bill to mandate a state oral health program and its passage as law. Working with the Arkansas State Dental Association, the Office of Oral Health offered wording suggestions for the bill. The dental association drafted the bill and had a state representative sponsor it. The bill passed both houses of the legislature unanimously and the governor signed it into law in 2001. The statutory mandate for the state oral health program states:

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ARKANSAS:

SECTION 1. Arkansas Code 25-9-101, concerning creation of and divisions within the Department of Health, is amended by adding the following additional subsection:

- (1) The Department of Health shall maintain an Office of Oral Health.
- (2) The Director of the Office of Oral Health shall be an experienced public health dentist licensed to practice under the Arkansas Dental Practice Act, which begins at § 17-82-101. 27
- (3) The director shall:
 - Plan, direct, and coordinate all dental public health programs with other local, state, and national health programs;
 - Serve as the department's chief advisor on matters involving oral health; and
 - Plan, implement, and evaluate all oral health programs within the department.

Since passage of the mandate, state agencies have suffered serious budget cuts. Because of the new legislation, the oral health program did not experience any reduction in funding.

Lessons Learned:

The existence of the new legislation was paramount to the continued existence of the state oral health program during budget cuts enacted less than one month after passage. Without the new mandate, oral health would certainly have been subjected to increased pressure to downsize or be eliminated. Instead, budget discussions were specifically steered away from oral health at the direction of the state health officer.

During the 2005 session of the Arkansas General Assembly, at the direction of Governor Mike Huckabee, the health department was merged with social services to create the Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The mandate for the oral health program, including the exact same language mandating the oral health program, was part of the merger legislation.

During the 2007 session of the Arkansas General Assembly, at the direction of Governor Mike Beebe, DHHS was de-merged into separate departments of health and social services. Again, the exact same language mandating the oral health program was included in the legislation.

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