

Dental Public Health Activity Descriptive Summary

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Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI)

There is a crisis in oral health in Connecticut. Tooth decay remains the most common chronic childhood disease in Connecticut. In the recently released Every Smile Counts Report by the Connecticut Department of Public Health, it affects 40% of all third graders. The incidence has been estimated to affect 80% of seventeen-year-olds. We could wipe out oral disease with quality dental care from an early age. Instead, our children miss hundreds of thousands of hours of school annually due to tooth decay and oral infection. In the last few years, almost one-half of Connecticut dentists now accept Medicaid/HUSKY clients, mostly children. This has had a positive impact on children covered by Medicaid, but there are still a high number of children exhibiting dental decay.

Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI) began in 1993 as a committee of the Connecticut State Dental Association to address the crisis. In 2003, COHI became an independent non-profit organization committed to oral health care for all and is the only statewide oral health advocacy organization in Connecticut. COHI is a broad-based coalition of health professionals, business and community leaders dedicated to improving Connecticut's systems for providing oral health care. COHI has gained statewide recognition for its expertise in oral health advocacy and policy work. COHI's vision is a Connecticut where all residents have access to affordable, high quality oral health services. COHI's mission: "Through advocacy, coalition building, and education the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI) creates a public conscience that results in access to oral health care for all."

COHI's recent accomplishments include:

1. **ADVOCACY:** COHI took the lead role in advocating for the settlement of a class action lawsuit (*Carr vs. Wilson-Coker*), in 2008, which resulted in improved reimbursement of dental services for children enrolled in Medicaid/CHIP. COHI supported the mandate that requires an Office of Oral Health within the CT DPH overseen by the State Dental Director. We continue to advocate preserving CT's adult Medicaid dental benefits each year when threatened to be eliminated by the legislature.
2. **AWARENESS:** COHI has participated in a number of health fairs promoting oral health as a vital part of overall health. In January of 2013, COHI held an Oral Health Awareness Day COHI with the theme "A Healthy Body Starts with a Healthy Mouth" at the Legislative Office Building Concourse. The purpose was to make oral health a priority and develop champions for our cause. COHI with its co-sponsors, DPH Office of Oral Health and CT Coalition on Oral Health, partnered with 12 other organizations in the event. The day consisted of table clinics on oral health and related health issues. There was an informative oral health presentation addressing oral health disparities by Linda Ferraro, State Dental Director. The audience was legislators and their staff, related state agencies and the general public.
3. **COALITION-BUILDING:** COHI works to improve access to oral care through coalition building. By working with a number of state departments, i.e. State of Connecticut Departments of Public Health, Social Services, Aging, and Developmental Services, AHECs, dental professional organizations, School-Based Health Centers, Community Health Centers and dental professional schools, a large constituency recognizes the importance of oral health.
4. **COMMUNICATION:** COHI keeps the state informed on new developments in oral health policy through our bi-monthly email alerts and popular website, www.ctoralhealth.org.
5. **POLICY EDUCATION/ACTION:** COHI is working with the Connecticut Health Foundation to organize and educate the eight oral health collaboratives across Connecticut about key policy issues and effective advocacy.

Lessons Learned:

COHI will continue as the premier advocacy organization advancing the profile and quality of, and access to, oral health care services. We recognize the need to focus on advocacy, awareness and education, while continuing to focus on the necessity of oral health inclusion in all health plans. We will continue to engage legislators, state agencies, other organizations and the public to preserve a robust HUSKY program for Connecticut's neediest children and adults. We will continue to strive to incorporate preventive services into the state's Health Care Exchange, but we are extending our thrust for the inclusion of all essential diagnostic, preventive and restorative services. Our plans are predicated upon more visits with legislators by our staff, board and lobbyist, while continuing to educate other target groups on the necessity of oral health inclusion in all health plans.

Our oral health advocacy is centered on the needs of children and youth, pregnant women, older adults and other vulnerable populations with more focus on racially, ethnically, or culturally diverse Connecticut residents. The awareness portion will be accomplished through media campaigns, working with coalitions and other organizations with which we share targeted populations. Communications with the primary care medical community that began in this past year will be continued with increasing focus on the inclusion of oral health assessment and providing oral health care as vital for the total health of these targeted populations. Education courses will be developed and presented for each targeted community: medical professionals, health-related organizations, health educators and dental professionals.

COHI plans to educate consumers and policy makers about these important concerns, leading them to become advocates of these oral health issues. While continuing established connections, we need to communicate and establish collaborations with other like-minded and similarly committed organizations and those that focus on our priority areas.

Additional information on COHI is available on its bilingual website at <http://www.ctoralhealth.org>.

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