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LOUISIANA DENTAL ASSOCIATION

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LDA Says PEW Report Card Is Wake-Up Call, but Incomplete Picture of Children’s Oral Health in Louisiana

Report highlights opportunities for community water fluoridation and continued growth of rural health initiatives

BATON ROUGE — As the largest organization for dental professionals in the state representing 80 percent of Louisiana’s active licensed dentists, the Louisiana Dental Association (LDA) appreciates the report from the Pew Center on the States, *The Cost of Delay: State Dental Policies Fail One in Five Children*, that has given attention and clarity to its longstanding fight to improve oral health care for our most vulnerable citizens—our children.

“The report sheds light on several critical dental care issues,” according to the LDA’s Executive Director Ward Blackwell. “Anyone who reads this report will find it troubling, as did we, even though it does acknowledge some progress made in recent years and confirms the value of our present initiatives.”

Blackwell explains that the report applauds the Legislature’s passage in 2008 of a mandate that local water systems with 5,000 service connections or more provide customers with optimally-fluoridated water once the funding becomes available. However, the report then criticizes the state for failing to fund the mandate due to budget shortfalls.

“The State’s budget situation poses serious funding challenges, especially in the health care arena,” Blackwell says. “For instance, the lack of funding for fluoridation cited in the report stymies full implementation of one of the most cost-effective public health measures there is. Studies in Louisiana show every \$1 spent on community water fluoridation leads to roughly \$38 in taxpayer savings.”

According to the state Department of Health and Hospitals, only about 40 percent of Louisiana’s population receives optimally fluoridated water. The national average is nearly 70 percent, and the federal “Healthy People 2010” goal is 75 percent.

“Likewise,” Blackwell says, “the recent cuts to Medicaid and the even more severe cuts that may loom ahead threaten to erase the substantial progress made in the past decade to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates in order to increase dentist participation in the program.”

“I know that the governor and the Legislature would like to make additional funds available for these programs as soon as possible, and we hope that this report provides some encouragement to help make oral health care a higher priority,” he adds.

The Pew Report says that Louisiana met or exceeded important oral health goals in only two of eight benchmarks. That fails to tell the whole story, according to Blackwell, especially in light of many recent efforts by state and local officials, as well as oral health professionals across the state, to directly address areas of concern referenced in the report.

“The report makes clear that, as a state, we have lots of room for improvement of children’s oral health care,” says Blackwell. “However, it neglects to acknowledge such initiatives by the state, LDA and other health care organizations as the Louisiana’s Rural Scholars Program and tax incentives to encourage more dentists to practice in rural areas, or the LDA’s Dental Home pilot program that is designed to establish ongoing relationships with dentists and Medicaid-eligible children at an early age.”

Because dentists have clearly recognized the need for additional assistance for children in need, there are community clinics in seven cities throughout Louisiana, and Louisiana dentists have donated more than \$1 million in free services through the Donated Dental Services program.

“Improving oral health in Louisiana will require a multi-faceted approach, and the LDA is committed to continuing its support for all these and other programs that will significantly advance that objective,” Blackwell concludes.

ABOUT THE LOUISIANA DENTAL ASSOCIATION

Established in 1878, the Louisiana Dental Association (LDA) is the largest professional health organization for dentists in Louisiana. It is a statewide grassroots organization whose purpose is to encourage the improvement of and to protect the health of the public, and to represent the interests of the members of the dental profession and the public it serves. The LDA has more than 1,800 members.

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