



NEWS RELEASE

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Alabama earns a C on oral health, 2001 report card shows

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Alabama and the U.S. each received Cs in oral health on a national report card released by the advocacy group Oral Health America. State-based efforts to reduce the number of Alabama children who suffer from poor oral health and its consequences helped to boost the state's overall oral health grade to a C, up from a D in 2000. The nation received its lowest grades in areas concerning prevention and access to care.

"We in Alabama cannot underestimate the importance of good oral health," said Dr. Stuart A. Lockwood, Director of the Oral Health Branch of the Bureau of Family Services, Alabama Department of Public Health. "We can make great strides in improving oral health by increasing support for proven preventive measures and by working to ensure that more children and adults see a dentist on a regular basis."

The report card signifies new possibilities for the future as well as highlighting widespread unmet dental needs, according to Dr. Lockwood. Alabama was one of eight states which hired a state dental director in the past year, an important step in supplying vital leadership at the state level to make progress in improving oral health for children and adults.

While access to dental care remained a problem nationwide, Alabama improved its grade for its Medicaid program from an F last year to a C minus this year thanks to the state's Smile Alabama! Initiative announced by Gov. Don Siegelman in October 2000.

As a result, says Dr. Mary McIntyre, Associate Medical Director of the Alabama Medicaid Agency, and head of its dental program, 135 new dentists are enrolled as Medicaid providers and there has been an increase of 20,000 in the number of children who received dental care in the past year. Of the state's 1.2 million children and young people under age 21, nearly 400,000 qualify for dental services through Medicaid.

The Children's Health Insurance Program (ALL Kids), established in 1998, provides health care for an additional 42,000 children statewide. Approximately 60 percent of ALL Kids enrollees have accessed at least one dental service. According to Dr. Don Williamson, Alabama's state health officer, in excess of \$12.7 million (approximately 15 percent of total benefits paid) was spent on dental services since the program began.

Dr. Williamson indicated that one of the reasons for success with ALL Kids is that the program has a broad panel of dentists in the provider network. He further indicated, "While we recognize that Alabama has a way to go before reaching optimal dental care for all of its citizens we are

making tremendous strides in some areas of dental care and access through the Smile Alabama! Initiative, ALL Kids and other collaborative efforts.

Alabama's grade for the proportion of adults who visited a dentist in the past year was a C plus overall (61 percent of all adults), but was an F for low-income adult populations (only 33 percent of this group visited a dentist). Most states had one-third or more people who did not visit a dentist at least once last year.

In terms of prevention, Alabama had mixed grades. It received a B for efforts in community water fluoridation (82 percent of the state's population on public water benefit from fluoridation), but a D for dental sealants as no more than one-third of the state's third-graders have a sealant.

Nationwide, 10 states received Fs for community water fluoridation and only two states received a grade as high as a B minus for dental sealants. Too few communities have taken advantage of these cost-effective prevention measures.

Oral health awareness clearly has increased during the past year. In Alabama, initiatives by several state agencies, including the Alabama Medicaid Agency, the Alabama Department of Public Health, and the University of Alabama School of Dentistry, in collaboration with dental organizations in the state including the Alabama Dental Association, the Alabama Dental Society, the Alabama Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and the Alabama Academy of General Dentistry, are addressing access to dental care, oral health promotion and oral disease prevention.

"For optimal oral health for children and adults in our state, it will require everyone, not just the dental community," said Dr. Lockwood. "Parents, teachers, other health professionals, business, industry and the public are all needed to improve our state's oral health. Much work remains, but it is good to see this progress in the past year."

Oral Health America is a national dental health advocacy organization dedicated to improving oral health. The report card was funded in part from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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