

WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Taking Good Care of Our Future

A community functions well when its residents have access to a full range of services—from electricity and transportation to education and health care. Unfortunately, changes in our economy have left significant gaps in the systems of care for some communities in Massachusetts.

A case in point: today in Massachusetts, fewer of our communities have practicing dentists. In one-third of our cities and towns, there are simply not enough dentists to care for the people who live there; many communities—rural and urban—have no dentists at all.

To make matters worse, almost two-thirds of the Commonwealth's communities have no pediatric dentist. This despite the fact that dental decay is the most common chronic childhood disease in America, five times more common than asthma. In MA, nearly half of all children have experienced tooth decay by the time they reach third grade. These children have trouble eating, speaking and paying attention in class. They are also at risk for other illnesses, because oral health is essential to overall health.

We can fix this if we work together to find ways to support dental professionals to work in underserved areas.

That's why the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, as part of a growing coalition of health, business and civic groups, is pushing for public solutions to this very important public problem. One key strategy: Providing tuition forgiveness and scholarships to new dentists and dental hygienists who commit to working in health centers and publicly licensed dental programs for specified time periods. This simple act could significantly increase access to care in under-served communities.

Right now, nearly a third of the communities in Massachusetts would qualify as Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas, and many of our dentists are nearing retirement with fewer young dentists to take their place. That greatly limits the pool of health professionals from whom we can seek regular care.

If the Commonwealth increased state funding for tuition awards and loan repayment for dental professionals, our state would have a more robust mechanism for recruiting and retaining skilled dental providers in community settings. What's more, there is a fringe benefit to this strategy. Helping younger dental professionals establish practices makes good business sense. Community health centers, where they would work, are often the catalyst for economic development in their communities – improving economic, as well as medical, wellbeing.

Nationally, 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental disease. If we want our children to grow up to be productive workers and contributing members of the community, we must provide them with access to the services that any functioning community offers, including high-quality dental care.

So let's work together to remind our legislators that oral health is vitally important to the health of our communities. Let's connect the mouth to the body, by connecting dentists to our communities.

James W. Hunt, Jr.

President & Chief Executive Officer – Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers

www.WatchYourMouth.org

or call 1-866-WYMouth (1-866-996-6884)