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Oral Health/Overall Health: Ensuring that School Children Have a Dental Exam

An Act Relative to Pupil Dental Health

Bill Sponsor: Representative Michael F. Kane

Proposal

Dental disease is the most common, chronic childhood disease, five times more common than asthma. In the United States, it is estimated that 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental-related causes. Students have physical exams and the required vaccinations, as well as having their vision and hearing tested. We owe it to our children to ensure that they have their teeth and gums checked as well.

This bill would require that every child in Massachusetts have a dental exam in the twelve months before entering kindergarten or initial date of enrollment. A dental exam requires comprehensive analysis by a licensed dentist trained to recognize, diagnose and treat dental disease. A preliminary dental exam is also an important first step in informing parents of the status of their child's oral health and encouraging them to make an appointment for follow-up care. Furthermore, an exam meets the Medicaid definition of "dental services" that must be reported annually under the Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) statutes and will help in documenting the status of children's oral health in the Commonwealth.

According to the US Census Bureau, 6% of the persons living in Massachusetts are children under five years. Using that statistic, and with over 4,800 dentists licensed by the Commonwealth, there is roughly one dentist for every eighty of those children, a figure that indicates that every child should be able to receive a dental exam within the year preceding enrolment. While an uneven distribution of those dentists may exist, the Massachusetts Dental Society is ready to implement a program to meet those challenges. Our Mobile Access to Care Van can certainly be used as a platform for delivering exams. The Society is also committed to creating a network of members who can provide exams to and has committed to a goal of having 65% of our members enlisted as MassHealth providers by 2013.

An Act Relative to Pupil Health also creates an important mechanism for collecting data obtained through forms that will be required as verification that the student has had a dental exam. By creating a statewide database we will all be able to better document areas of the state where access to a dentist is a challenge and the impact of various public health initiatives such as fluoridation. This bill also allows parents to opt-out of the exam, including for lack of access to a dentist – information that will help us to better target efforts to increase access to care across the Commonwealth.

Conclusion

The Massachusetts Dental Society urges the General Court to take favorable action on this item and ensure that every student have a dental exam and to help parents and children understand that oral health is a critical component of overall health.