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Mass Dental Society Presents its *Call to Action* at State House Press Conference

BOSTON -- For nearly two years, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS), the state's leading oral health care organization representing 5,000 dentists, has been working to create a comprehensive plan with one overriding goal: to improve the oral health care of every resident of the Commonwealth. Standing this morning alongside state healthcare officials, advocates, and elected officials, leaders of the MDS presented the result of that effort, ***Call to Action: A plan for improving the oral health of Massachusetts residents by 2013.***

"This is a first-of-its-kind initiative that identifies a dozen key issues that we, as an organization, believe need to be addressed in the next five years – issues which will have the most benefit to the oral health of all residents of the Commonwealth," said MDS President Milton Glicksman, DMD.

According to Dr. Glicksman, there have been multiple studies linking poor oral health with physical ailments such as heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and low-birth weight babies in pregnant women.

As a result, the MDS is sponsoring legislation this year that would require every child in Massachusetts to have a dental exam by a dentist before entering Kindergarten, in much the same way as children are required to have physical exams before starting school. According to Dr. Glicksman, if parents don't have private dental insurance or MassHealth coverage (the state's Medicaid insurance program), the Massachusetts Dental Society will help them find a dentist who will offer these exams at a reduced fee for income-eligible families.

In addition, the Dental Society has set a goal to have 65 percent of their membership, including specialists, participate in the MassHealth program by the year 2013. "In the past year alone," according to Dr. Glicksman, "we have doubled the number of MassHealth providers and we are continuing to recruit about one new dentist a day."

Another issue addressed within the ***Call to Action*** is a proposal to work with the state to assist dental school graduates with tuition and loan repayment "For many," according to Dr. Lonnie Norris, dean of

the Tufts School of Dental Medicine, “this funding can make the difference between success and failure for dental school graduates who will be struggling with hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt.”

Faced with this debt, most students must accept the most lucrative job offer “rather than offering their skills and talents to those in the greatest need,” he said. “Community service should not be thought of merely as an option for those in the dental profession who can afford to do it. Instead, it should be seen as an obligation for everyone. It’s a way to give back to the profession.”

Dr. Norris will also work to expand students’ community service curriculum. “Many of these community outreach programs and opportunities have already been added to the traditional dental school curriculum,” he said. “We look forward to expanding them in the coming years; so that we can meet the growing demand for access to care that will only increase in a declining economic environment.”

James Hunt, Jr., president of the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, said he will collaborate with the dental schools as they expand their community service curriculum to include voluntary assignments at one of the League’s 52 community health centers.

The health centers, according to Hunt, play a critical role in providing high-quality health care – including oral health services – to the underserved population. However, at this point, the need for oral health care exceeds the health centers’ capacity to provide those services. “As health care professionals, we understand that no one can claim to be 100 percent healthy unless their teeth are healthy. A broken bone can be repaired, a wound can be sutured, but unless our patients are seen regularly by a dental professional, their health care is incomplete,” Hunt said. “We welcome this opportunity to work with the Dental Society as we advocate for more funding to create additional dental practices within the community health centers.”

“The promotion of oral health is an important part of the work we do here at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health,” said Department of Public Health Commissioner John Auerbach. “I applaud the efforts of partners like the Massachusetts Dental Society to increase access to oral health care for all of our residents, particularly our most vulnerable residents. We will continue to work with dentists throughout the Commonwealth to raise awareness of the importance of good oral health because it is an integral part of good overall health.”

Also participating in the February 19th press conference was Rep. John Scibak (D-Hadley), a co-chairman of the legislative oral health caucus.

“The Massachusetts Dental Society has taken an active role in developing strategies to overcome the various barriers many in Massachusetts face when attempting to access oral health care. Through passage of the Omnibus Oral Health Care legislation earlier this year, as well as through several new pieces of legislation, the Legislature continues to do its part to protect the oral health of all who live in the Commonwealth,” he said. “Without the leadership of the Dental Society, the legislature would not be as successful in ensuring that these initiatives become reality, and I thank the Society for their ongoing partnership.”