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First in the Nation Children's Oral Health Legislation

Maine Becomes a Leader in Children's Dental Benefit Coverage

AUGUSTA, MAINE – June 1, 2010 – The first in the nation legislation to ensure Maine's youngest children have access to early preventive dental care was signed today by Maine Governor John Baldacci in a signing ceremony at the statehouse. Senator Justin Alford sponsored An Act To Improve Dental Insurance Coverage for Maine Children because he wanted to ensure that all dental benefit plans provide coverage to children from the age of birth.

"Recently it came to my attention that some insurers were offering employer dental plans that would only begin coverage of children at two, three or four years of age. By this age, children can have significant tooth decay that could be avoided by seeing a dentist as soon as their first teeth appear," says Senator Alford.

The American Dental Association, American Academy of Pediatrics and American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry all recommend that children see a dentist by their first birthday to reduce the risk of tooth decay.

"With this legislation Maine is setting a high standard for children's dental benefit coverage," notes Governor John Baldacci. "I am pleased to sign this bill into law and make Maine a leader for children's oral health."

Studies have shown the dramatic positive effect early visits to the dentist provide... "Children who receive early preventive care, starting at age 1, can have 50% less tooth decay," notes Dr. Jonathan Shenkin, a Maine pediatric dentist and President of the Maine Dental Association.

"Less oral disease means children will have less dental pain – and fewer visits to the dentist over their lifetime. Parents can reduce costs for dental care over a short period of time by bringing babies in to the dentist as soon as the baby teeth erupt," he adds.

This legislation is important because extending dental benefits gives parents the option to receive early preventive care for their children, Alford adds.

The bill was supported by the Maine Children's Alliance, Northeast Delta Dental and the Maine Dental Association.

“This legislation will bring savings for families – both in potential pain from dental disease, and in money saved from fewer visits to the dentist,” says Dean Crocker, President and CEO of the Maine Children’s Alliance.

The legislation is simple in its approach. Beginning in January of 2011, any dental plan offered in Maine will have to provide parents the ability to enroll their child at birth, or at any age thereafter. Whether or not children are enrolled will be entirely up to the parents. “Parents won’t have to wait until their children are older to realize the benefits from their dental plans,” Shenkin adds.

The Maine Dental Association asked Senator Alford to submit this legislation after a local dentist treated a four year old child who had significant tooth decay. The parent said she didn’t bring the child to the dentist earlier because her dental benefit plan didn’t pay for earlier care, after some investigation it turns out the parents’ employer had an age restriction for enrollment which has been very common in Maine for dental benefit plans. The child had extensive dental needs that could have been averted if preventive dental care had been covered at an earlier age.

“This sad story was very troubling to the Association members,” says Frances Miliano, MDA Executive Director. “We know that prevention is the best weapon we have to stop dental disease, but lack of coverage for this child was a barrier to preventive care. We strongly believe dental benefit plans must provide the option for early care. Many plans in Maine already offer this option – but we wanted to be sure that all plans are standardized.”

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