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More Children Receiving Preventive Dental Care in HUSKY Program, But Most Still Do Not Get Preventive Visits

HUSKY responsible for dental care for one in four children in state

Thousands more children are receiving dental care from the state's HUSKY health insurance program, continuing a three-year trend of gradual improvement, according to a new study from Connecticut Voices for Children. The report finds that 40% of children continuously enrolled in the HUSKY A program (Medicaid) in 2003 received at least one preventive dental care service in 2003, up from 38% the previous year and from a low of 34% in 2000. The finding is particularly encouraging given that enrollment in the program has increased substantially over this period. Thus, over 9,000 additional children have received dental care through HUSKY A in each of the past two years. Children most likely to receive preventive dental care were school-age children, Hispanic children, and children living in Hartford.

However, despite these gains, most children (60%) enrolled in HUSKY did not get *any* preventive dental care. Although pediatric and dental health care guidelines call for two preventive visits per year, few children (13%) had more than one preventive visit in 2003.

The public health implications of the HUSKY program's relatively poor performance in providing dental care are wide reaching, since HUSKY is responsible for providing dental care to about one in four children and youth in the state. Tooth decay ("dental caries") is the most common chronic disease of childhood. Low-income children are disproportionately affected by dental problems and are more likely to go untreated.

"While this trend of improvement is encouraging, Connecticut clearly has a long way to go to get most children the preventive care they need," said Mary Alice Lee, author of the report and Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. "Policy makers, HUSKY health plans, and providers need to do more to reach families and bring them in for preventive care."

Families can choose from four HUSKY health plans when enrolling in the program. In HUSKY's managed care system, the state pays these HUSKY health plans a monthly fee for each enrolled member and requires the plans, in turn, to provide services required by federal law, including regular preventive dental care visits. The state makes these payments whether or not the member receives any services; when required care is *not* provided, the plans are not required to reimburse the state.

"Children with poor oral health are more likely to get sick and miss school, and have more difficulty concentrating in class," said Sharon Langer, Senior Policy Fellow at CT Voices. "If we want children to succeed in school, preventive dental care is a necessary first step."

Greater Hartford Legal Aid has filed a class action lawsuit against the Connecticut Department of Social Services on behalf of families in the HUSKY program, charging that the state has failed to meet its obligations under Medicaid law to provide adequate dental services to HUSKY members.

Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based policy and advocacy organization for children and families. For more information about the organization or a copy of the report, *HUSKY A Provides Dental Care for More Children in 2003*, see the CT Voices Web site at www.ctkidslink.org.

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