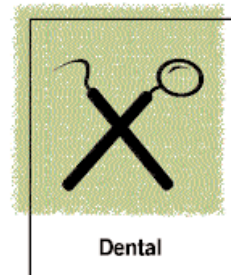


FIRSTHEALTH COMMUNITY VOICES FACT SHEET



Shortage of Dental Health Professionals Heightens Disparities in Care



BACKGROUND

FirstHealth of the Carolinas (FirstHealth) is a not-for-profit health system serving a largely rural 15-county area in the mid-Carolinas. FirstHealth is concerned by the evidence that the burden of oral diseases and disorders is falling disproportionately on lower-income families and individuals, particularly in rural areas. One of the reasons for this disparity is the overall shortage of dental professionals in rural areas of North Carolina, as well as the shortage of dental professionals willing to serve Medicaid patients. That is why FirstHealth established three dental care centers for low-income and Medicaid-eligible children, serving an average of 1,000 children a month. However, the situation remains serious for low-income and uninsured adults and children in many areas of the state.

STATE AND LOCAL FACTS

- ◆ Only one in five North Carolina dentists treats 10 or more Medicaid patients per quarter.
- ◆ 2001-2002 statistics indicate that 24 percent of North Carolina children entering kindergarten have untreated tooth decay, a percentage that has remained stable over the last several years.
- ◆ North Carolina has 41 dentists per 100,000 persons, compared to a national average of 60 per 100,000.
- ◆ According to a professionally conducted community health survey performed for FirstHealth, only 43 percent of low-income adults visited a dentist or dental clinic within the last year.
- ◆ Within the FirstHealth service area, Anson, Hoke, Montgomery, Richmond and Robeson counties are federally designated dental professional shortage areas for services to low-income groups.

OTHER KEY FACTS

- ◆ Statistics indicate that since 1990 the number of dentists per 100,000 persons has been in decline nationally.
- ◆ Minority racial and ethnic groups are severely underrepresented in the dental profession as compared to their representation in the general population.
- ◆ An estimated 22.5 million Americans need and cannot obtain dental care.
- ◆ Preventable dental disease costs the United States billions of dollars in productivity due to time lost at work and school.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Increase the diversity, capacity and flexibility of the dental health workforce by increasing dental school enrollment and more effectively utilizing “dentist extenders.” One proposal by the American Dental Hygienists Association is to create an advanced dental hygiene practitioner position to expand the role of the dental hygienist as an important provider of preventive dental care.
- ◆ Encourage current dentists to open their practices to more Medicaid patients by improving Medicaid reimbursement for dental services.
- ◆ At the state and national level, provide development funds and grants for community health care providers to establish preventive care centers along the model of the FirstHealth Dental Care Centers.