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## **Lack of Access, Education Impact Oral Health** Coalition releases finding on Oral Health of Kent County Residents

**Grand Rapids**—Kent County led the nation by being the first community to add fluoride to its water system nearly 70 years ago - a top ten public health achievement of the past century. But today, Kent County is experiencing an oral health crisis. According to the new Michigan Oral Health Coalition report *2013 Check-Up on Oral Health; Age One Dental Visits*, Kent County ranks lowest with only 0.2% of Medicaid-enrolled children receiving dental visits at age one. And the 2011 Community Health Needs Assessment ranked “lack of access to dental care” in the top five health concerns for residents. Community members formed the Kent County Oral Health Coalition, and today released a report on the current oral health of county residents—*The Kent County Oral Health Exam*.

Basic oral health care—proper nutrition, oral hygiene, routine cleaning, sealants and early treatment of cavities and gum disease - is critical to our overall health and well-being. However, thousands of children and adults in Kent County go without that basic level of care. “We often see the toll of untreated oral health issues in our hospitals,” said Edward Cox, M.D., Co-Chairperson of the Kent County Oral Health Coalition. “Lack of access to less-expensive preventive care results in costly visits to emergency departments.”

In 2011, First Steps, a local early childhood organization, convened a small group of concerned organizations and people to create a community conversation about the oral health crisis in Kent County. From that conversation emerged The Kent County Oral Health Coalition, an active and collaborative group who believe that change is needed to improve the oral health of Kent county citizens, particularly those who have limited access to care. “Our medical community understands that oral health is not separate from primary care,” said Colette Smiley, D.D.S., Co-Chairperson of the Kent County Oral Health Coalition. “It is critical to overall health.”

Partner agencies have been working on solutions to this crisis. The Kent County Health Department announced a partnership with Michigan Community Dental Clinics that will provide dental care at a recently-acquired South Dental Clinic, slated to open in Kentwood in June of 2014. But the group knows more needs to be done. “This is a complex issue: a cavity or other dental issues can impact a child’s ability to concentrate or behave in school; it impacts self-esteem, the ability to get a job; the mouth is truly the gateway to the entire body,” said Nelle Peck, of the Prevention and Education Subcommittee for the Kent County Oral Health Coalition. “Kent County is known for finding ways to solve social issues through the grassroots efforts of community, and this team is committed to finding solutions.”

The group is currently working on an action plan to create better oral health in Kent County, through access as well as education initiatives. “We need to figure out - beyond getting people into clinics and dental chairs - how to keep people working on prevention,” said Reggie VanderVeen, D.D.S., coalition member.

The comprehensive report can be located at [www.firststepskent.org](http://www.firststepskent.org).

**Several members of the coalition are available for interviews from 9 a.m. through 1 p.m. today. Please contact Lisa LaPlante at 616.632.7182 to arrange interviews in person, over the phone, or by email.**

*(fact sheet follows)*

## **Access is a significant issue.**

- Twenty-six percent of adults in Kent County have not seen the dentist in the past year, including 48 percent of those without dental insurance (Behavioral Risk Factors Survey, 2008).
- Twenty-six percent of respondents in a Kent County Oral Health Coalition survey of older adults reported they currently have untreated oral health issues.
- The current supply of dentists serving low-income patients in Kent County is only 29 percent of what is needed; in the city of Grand Rapids, it is 55 percent of what is needed (Kent County Health Department, 2011).
- The emergency department is often a last resort for people who do not receive preventive oral health care. In Kent County, there were an estimated 7,667 visits to the emergency department for preventable dental conditions in 2011 (Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project, AHRQ, 2011).
- Forty-six patients in Kent County were admitted to the hospital from the emergency department in 2011 with preventable disorders of the teeth and jaw; that number does not include emergency department dental patients who were admitted for trauma or accidents. The total cost for those hospital stays was \$889,594—significantly more than routine care that likely could have prevented the problems (Michigan Oral Health Coalition, 2013).

## **Kent County residents and providers need more knowledge.**

- The American Dental Association, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that infants have an oral health screening within six months of getting their first tooth or by their first birthday, whichever comes sooner.
- In a recent survey of Kent County parents conducted for the Coalition, only 24 percent of respondents said children should visit the dentist by age one; 40 percent replied not until age three or later.
- Replying to a recent survey for the Coalition, 49 percent of local dentists recommend a first dental visit by the first birthday. Nearly the same number said they do not recommend a visit until age two or three.
- In the Coalition's survey of older adults in Kent County, 77 percent of respondents recognize the importance of routine dental visits even if there is no oral health emergency, 95 percent say daily brushing of teeth or dentures is important, and 94 percent say the condition of their teeth is important to their overall health.

## **A Broader View of the Burden of Oral Disease**

- Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease in the United States—five times more common than asthma—and is considered by many to be the largest unmet health need among the nation's low-income children. (United State Department of Health and Human Services, 2000)
- One in four third graders in Michigan has untreated tooth decay. (Michigan Department of Community Health, 2010)
- Dental examinations of young children in Kent County's Head Start program, a federally funded preschool program for children living in poverty, revealed that half of the children had untreated cavities and one-third had five cavities or more. (Head Start for Kent County, 2012)
- One in five Michigan adults between the ages of 65-74 has lost all of his or her natural teeth. (MDCH, 2010)
- Untreated dental disease increases costs of the health care system through the added burden of patients seeking care through hospital emergency departments, patients in need of costly hospital-based operating room care, and from diminished medical outcomes resulting from dental infection's impact on systemic conditions.