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## Progress made on oral health, but problems remain

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TOPEKA — Efforts by policymakers, advocates and state health foundations over the past five years to improve Kansas' oral health system are paying off.

A report card issued Wednesday shows that while the state is no longer at risk for failing grades, it has much work left to do to fix several structural weaknesses in the system.

The report card was compiled by Oral Health America and released through Oral Health Kansas, a statewide coalition formed in 2003 to address problems that earned the state an overall grade of "D+" that year.

The 2009 report card gives Kansas an overall "B." But Dawn McGlasson, a Kansas researcher who helped develop the report, said much of the improvement was due to extra credit points, not higher scores in key measurement areas.

A "B" grade means there is still room for improvement," McGlasson said.

The state earned an overall grade of "D-" in the access category because of the number of counties without a dentist, a shortage of pediatric dentists and a lack of participation by dentists in the Medicaid program, which provides health care to children, pregnant women and disabled adults.

The state earned some credit for efforts in the last few years to extend Medicaid dental benefits to special needs populations such as the frail elderly and disabled adults. However, advocates said, legislation approved last year to extend dental benefits to pregnant women on Medicaid is not funded in Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' proposed fiscal year 2010 budget because of projected revenue shortfalls.

Kansas also was graded down because it doesn't have a state law requiring communities to fluoridate their drinking water. McGlasson pointed to Wichita as the main culprit for the state's "D" grade, noting that it is the second largest city in the nation without fluoridation. She said if the city began to treat its drinking water the overall state grade would probably rise to a "B."

"It would raise the score significantly, anyway," she said.

Denise Maseman, a Wichita dental hygienist who serves as president of Oral Health Kansas, noted that numerous attempts to convince city leaders to fluoridate have failed because of significant opposition from citizens "who don't believe the accepted science."

The report card cited as progress the creation of Oral Health Kansas and a recent change in dental practice rules that allow dental hygienists to perform screenings and preventive services at community-based sites under the general but not direct supervision of a dentist. That change in the law allowed safety net clinics — with the help of foundation grants and state funds — to establish dental hubs in underserved areas of the state.

The report called the dental hubs "a significant and promising new effort to increase access to dental care for Kansans without insurance and financial resources."

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