

State's dental health grade on rise

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Dental care programs in Kansas have earned the state a letter grade B, a dramatic improvement from the D-plus it received in 2003.

But pleased as the officers of Oral Health Kansas are with the improvement, "A 'B' grade means there is still room for improvement," said Dawn McGlasson, a board member of OHK.



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Dawn McGlasson says there is room for improvement.

The organization believes state government can do more to improve the access to and quality of dental care for all Kansans. But in light of the state's financial difficulties this legislative session, the best the group can hope for this year is to "keep what we have."

One populous part of Kansas that is dragging down the state's grade somewhat is Wichita, which still declines to add fluoridation to its drinking water.

In a breakdown of the components of the overall B grade, Kansas received a D in the category of "state policies." McGlasson said if Wichita were to fluoridate its water, that component likely would rise to at least a B, if not higher.

Denise Maseman, president of the OHK board, said brushing with a toothpaste containing fluoride helps, but it doesn't give the protection against tooth decay that fluoridated drinking water does. The fluoride in drinking water gives systemic protection. The benefit provided by toothpaste doesn't penetrate as deeply into the tooth surface, she said.

The issue is being tackled by OHK and by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, which hired a state dental director in 2006.

Among the recommendations:

- Expand adult Medicaid to provide dental coverage, increase the network of dentists who accept Medicaid patients and increase Medicaid dental reimbursements.
- Invest more in programs to provide dental care to underserved areas of the state.
- Educate pregnant women, parents of young children and caregivers about the importance of dental health.
- Promote healthy childhood nutrition, especially preschool and school nutrition programs.

OHK is a coalition of civic institutions and the health care sector.

OHK conducted the research under contract to Oral Health in America, the organization that did the ratings.