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Oral health topic of legislative hearings

By **Jim McLean**
KHI News Service

TOPEKA, Jan. 28 — Two national policy experts will make the case to the Legislature for expanding access to oral health care.

Andrew Snyder and Shelly Gehsan of the National Academy for State Health Policy are scheduled today and Tuesday to discuss before multiple committees a report they compiled for the Oral Health Kansas coalition. The report, "Kansas Health Reform: Options for Adding Dental Benefits," says that oral health is often left out of the discussion when states undertake reforms aimed at expanding access to health care.

"Although lack of dental care is the single largest unmet need among children, and more than twice as many people lack dental insurance as health insurance, the oral health needs of citizens and means to address them are seldom front and center in health reform debates," the report stated.

The authors outline three possibilities for expanding access to health care:

- Add benefits to the Medicaid program
- Devise a private program in which the state subsidizes people's premiums, or
- Implement a combination of the two approaches, similar to what is being attempted in Massachusetts

Teresa Schwab, executive director of Oral Health Kansas, a 200-member coalition, said the 21-point health reform plan drafted by the Kansas Health Policy Authority would take a first step by expanding Medicaid dental benefits to pregnant women. But she said the proposed \$500,000 expansion would still leave more than 60,000 poor adults without dental coverage.

"For an additional \$1 million, we can cover everyone," Schwab said, noting that to stay within that cost the coverage would have to be limited to \$1,000 per person per year. Full coverage for the estimated 70,000 Kansas adults who qualify for Medicaid would cost about \$5.2 million, she said.

Snyder and Gehsan are scheduled to testify to the Senate Health Care Strategies at 1:30 this afternoon and the House Social Services Budget Committee at 3:30 p.m. On Tuesday they will present their findings to the Senate Ways and Means Committee at 10:30 a.m. and the House Health and Human Services Committee at 1:30 p.m.

-Jim McLean is a staff writer for KHI News Service, which specializes in coverage of health issues facing Kansans. He can be reached at jmclean@khi.org or at 785-233-5443, ext. 110.

212 SW Eighth Avenue, Suite 300, Topeka, Kansas 66603-3936 | Phone: (785) 233-5443 | Fax: (785) 233-1168 | mailbox@khi.org
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