

**Testimony before the House Social Services Budget Committee  
Regarding Social and Rehabilitation Services Budget**

**February 20, 2004**

**Provided by: Teresa Schwab, LMSW, Executive Director  
Oral Health Kansas, Inc.**

Chairman Landwehr and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony to you regarding the Medicaid portion of the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services budget.

Oral Health Kansas is a newly established coalition of over 120 organizations and individuals who are committed to improving the oral health status of all Kansans. With support from major contributors, the coalition's advocacy, public education and awareness efforts will focus on prevention, access to oral health care, oral health leadership, oral health status and developing an oral health work force.

According to Oral Health America, Kansas ranks as the 5<sup>th</sup> worst state in the nation in its commitment to a sound, statewide oral health program. Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that many Kansans find it difficult to access appropriate oral health care, either due to a lack of providers, especially providers who accept Medicaid or HealthWave, or lack of transportation or child care to make scheduled appointments. In addition, many Kansans do not have access to effective measures to prevent tooth decay, such as fluoridated water or fluoride varnishes or sealants.

Currently, Medicaid only covers *emergency* dental services for adults. (Emergency services are only considered to be conditions that threaten the health of the person, such as the extraction of infected teeth.) **Because of this, many adult Medicaid recipients are forced to use hospital emergency rooms, a much more cost-intensive form of service delivery, for otherwise preventable dental health issues. The other options available are to either pay all costs out-of-pocket or to simply ignore the problem.**

As you are well aware, Medicaid serves the most vulnerable Kansans—those with disabilities, mental illness, frail elderly, highly impoverished and pregnant women living in poverty. Most of these individuals do not have the resources to pay for dental services on their own. In fact, hundreds of Kansans took advantage of free dental care through the Mission of Mercy free dental clinics that took place last year in Garden City and Wyandotte County. These Kansans stood in line for hours in extreme weather conditions simply to receive dental care that they otherwise could not access or could not afford. Another Mission of Mercy event is planned for the end of April in Pittsburg, Kansas. At least anecdotally, this speaks to the tremendous dental need in our state.

**In the enhanced version of the budget SRS submitted to the Governor, \$6.4 Million was added to expand Medicaid services for adults to include dental care. Unfortunately, this allocation was not made in the Governor's Recommended Budget. That \$6.4 Million investment of state funds can be matched with \$9.6 Million in federal dollars. We believe this is a good investment of resources and believe that these resources would have the ability to prevent much pain and suffering and the high cost of hospitalizations and advanced disease that result from delayed care.**

Oral Health Kansas understands the current economic climate, but we would certainly ask for your support to make oral health a priority for the most vulnerable Kansans should funding become available.

An immediate alternative to funding for dental services is a commitment to preventing dental caries before they happen. Legislation regarding community water fluoridation has been introduced this session, with no state dollar commitment. In fact, private dollars are currently available through a local foundation to help unfluoridated communities take that step to fluoridate their water systems. According to the Centers for Disease Control, water fluoridation is especially beneficial to individuals of low socioeconomic status who have a disproportionate burden of dental decay and have less access to dental care services and other sources of fluoride.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Respectfully submitted,  
Teresa R. Schwab, LMSW  
Executive Director  
Oral Health Kansas, Inc.  
215 SE 8<sup>th</sup> Ave.  
Topeka, KS 66603  
785.235.6039 (phone)  
785.233.5564 (fax)  
oralhealthks@carrollswab.com