

Pew Children's Dental Campaign **A new initiative of the Pew Center on the States**

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The Pew Center on the States launched a major effort to improve access to dental care for disadvantaged children. We are mounting a national campaign to raise awareness of the problem, recruit influential leaders to call for change, and showcase states that have made progress and can serve as models for reform. At the same time, we are launching advocacy efforts in a number of states where policy changes can dramatically improve children's lives.

By advocating for high-quality pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds, the Pew Children's Dental Campaign is helping young children thrive in school and become healthy, productive adults. Now we are putting our expertise to work on another serious challenge affecting kids' health, education and ability to prosper: lack of access to oral health care.

Tooth decay is the most common childhood disease, affecting nearly 60 percent of children—and it's getting worse. Between 1994 and 2002, it actually increased by 15 percent among kids aged two to five. Poor dental health disproportionately affects disadvantaged children: 80 percent of pediatric dental disease is concentrated in 25 percent of kids, primarily those from low-income and minority households.

Poor dental health impedes children's ability to learn—they miss some 51 million school hours annually because of dental-related illness. It impedes kids' ability to eat—causing some young children to fail to grow as expected, usually because of malnutrition. The consequences stretch beyond childhood. Several types of cardiovascular disease may be linked to poor oral health, including heart disease, clogged arteries, stroke and bacterial endocarditis. Gum disease can contribute to premature and low-weight births, as disease-causing organisms in pregnant women's mouths wind up in placenta or amniotic fluid.

Federal law requires states to provide dental health care to needy children through Medicaid—but only about 33 percent of Medicaid-enrolled kids see a dentist on a yearly basis. Although some states are doing a better job than others, many are failing to protect kids most in need of care.

The time is ripe for reform. In many states, Medicaid reimbursement rates should be increased and dental programs streamlined so more disadvantaged children will have access to dentists. Oral health should be better integrated with general health care, especially since children are far more likely to see a doctor than a dentist before their third birthday. In some urban and rural areas—where it's extraordinarily difficult to attract dentists—pediatricians, hygienists and even new types of dental providers could help fill the gaps. And school sealant programs and fluoridation could significantly improve children's oral health and actually reduce Medicaid spending on fillings and other preventable services.

Some problems may be intractable. This one is not. Working in concert with lawmakers and other government officials, dental providers, national, state and local organizations, researchers, advocates and the private sector, the Pew Center on the States can help millions of kids maintain healthy mouths, get the restorative care they need, and come to school ready and able to learn—truly something to smile about.

*For more information, please contact Shelly Gehshan,
at sgehshan@pewtrusts.org or visit www.pewcenteronthestates.org.*

The Pew Charitable Trusts applies the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. Pew's Center on the States identifies and advances effective policy approaches to critical issues facing states. We research emerging topics, develop 50-state comparisons, and highlight innovative approaches among states to complex problems. When the facts are clear, we advocate for nonpartisan, pragmatic solutions.

Shelly Gehshan, Project Director

Advancing Children's Dental Health A new initiative of the Pew Center on the States

August 1, 2008

The Pew Center on the States is pleased to announce that Shelly Gehshan will serve as project director for our new national initiative aimed at improving access to dental care for disadvantaged children. She will begin her new position with Pew on September 29 and will be based in our Washington, D.C., office.

Ms. Gehshan is a researcher, analyst, senior program manager and health policy expert who has nearly 20 years of experience working for state policy makers on issues affecting low-income women, children and families, including oral health, maternal and child health, Medicaid, SCHIP, mental health, substance abuse and health care financing.

Since 2005, Ms. Gehshan has been a senior program director at the National Academy for State Health Policy (NASHP) in Washington, D.C., a nonpartisan organization of state health policy makers that works across branches and agencies of state government. She has been responsible for policy research and analysis, program development and fundraising on a range of health policy topics. She developed NASHP's extensive portfolio of work in the area of oral health, including in-depth research and analysis on dental care access, financing, workforce and other issues, technical assistance to states, and policy forums for lawmakers. She has consulted for and collaborated with a wide range of stakeholders in the oral health field, including national and state government agencies and membership groups, such as the Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors and the Medicaid/SCHIP Dental Association; groups representing dental providers, including the American Dental Association and the American Dental Hygienists Association; philanthropic organizations; researchers, and advocacy groups.

Before joining NASHP, Ms. Gehshan spent nine years as a program director for the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Among other accomplishments, she served as managing director and senior policy analyst for NCSL's Forum for State Health Policy Leadership, which provides education and training, policy analyses and technical assistance for legislators and legislative staff. Ms. Gehshan spent six years as deputy director of the Southern Governors' Association's Infant Mortality Project, where she worked with governors and state legislators to expand access to prenatal care for low-income, pregnant women. She also has worked as an independent consultant on health policy issues for such organizations as the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Ms. Gehshan has a bachelor's degree in English from Cornell University and a master's degree in public policy from the University of California at Berkeley.